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[PRICE ONE PENNY.]



WITH A GROWL OF ANGUISH NELLIE STOPPED. THERE IN FRONT OF HER MAURICE LAY MOTIONLESS.

A DELICATE POSITION.

[A NOVELETTE.]

PROLOGUE.

All Maurice Stanhope's friends were aware that some event of unusual gravity had occurred in his life, though no one could quite understand its nature.

Pinder, who on the strength of a few bad puns, and an occasional Joe Miller, posed as a wit, humorously suggested that he was training for the stage, it having been rumoured that a famous French dancing-master had been frequently seen going to and coming from his rooms.

Barty Scott inclined to the opinion that he meditated entering Parliament and drew up facetious addresses to imaginary constituents, but this theory found few adherents.

Everyone, however, agreed that something of importance had happened, though it appeared,

the young man had taken no one into his confidence.

In the first place, his stay in London had already exceeded two months, which was quite unprecedented, since Maurice had no love for the great city, and rarely honoured it with more than a passing visit.

Far-seeing mammas with marriageable daughters had felt a little flutter at their hearts, at seeing him in fashionable ball-rooms from which he had hitherto religiously absented himself, and to those who knew him intimately his sudden patronage of musical matinées, afforded a source of wonder and amusement.

At this time, perhaps, Maurice's chief friend was Mrs. Brandon-Carter, one of the acknowledged leaders in society, but whom Maurice still looked upon as Mary Carter, the playmate and companion of his childhood.

That lady soon discovered Maurice's secret, and one afternoon when he called to see her, taxed him with it.

She was a pretty little woman, scarcely past her first youth, but with the wisdom and experience of a woman of the world.

Maurice, who was not a society man, always

felt at ease in her company, and on this particular afternoon, finding her alone, sat down and made himself perfectly at home.

"Maurice," exclaimed the lady, after chatting awhile upon indifferent topics, "are you going into Scotland this year?"

"I have scarcely decided. Why?"

"Mere idle curiosity, nothing more. Where is your yacht?"

"At Southampton; would you like a cruise? She is at your service."

"Thanks, but Edward is going into Germany, and I have promised to accompany him. What are your movements?"

"Upon my word, I really cannot say; they depend very much upon circumstances;" and he tried to avoid her eyes.

"Maurice, my dear boy," she cried laughingly, "it is useless attempting to deceive me; you are in love. Tell me all about it; who is the happy girl? I do know her!"

Maurice blushed furiously and endeavoured to turn the subject, but in vain; his hostess was inexorable.

"Now, don't be foolish," she said coaxingly, "I am simply dying with curiosity to learn the

name of the fortunate girl. Oh, dear, what a terrible blow it will be to the others! Do you know there are at least half a dozen ladies of my acquaintance who were really beginning to have some hopes of you, and now, heigh-presto! all their designs will be scattered. When is it to be? I do not think you have treated me quite fairly, in keeping this to yourself, but now you will make amends, by revealing everything."

Maurice attempted to smile, but the performance was not a success.

"You are too absurd Mary," he said presently; "there is nothing settled at all."

"Then, I am not wrong," she cried delightedly, "I am glad Maurice, for you need a wife to cure your propensity for foreign travel, and keep you at home."

"But suppose, she says 'No'?" he asked, dolorously.

Mrs. Brandon-Carter looked at him pityingly.

"My dear Maurice, don't be so exceedingly modest; modesty and the close of the nineteenth century do not harmonise; we have left all that kind of thing behind. Why, my dear, stupid fellow, your innocence is positively refreshing. What objection can a girl possibly make to your proposal? You are young, wealthy, handsome, of good birth and education, and pleasant, agreeable manners. Surely you are not faint-hearted?"

Maurice shook his head.

"I do not know," he answered, "I believe she likes me, but I have never summoned sufficient courage to ask her to be my wife."

"For shame, Maurice, you make me blush for you. Now listen to my commands, and if you value my friendship, see that they are obeyed. Find or rather make an opportunity, and get an answer to your question. Let there be no more procrastination, and then come and tell me the result."

She bade him farewell with a merry smile, and it was not until he had passed out into the street that she remembered she was still ignorant of the name of the girl, who had won his love.

The first result of the interview with Mrs. Brandon-Carter was Maurice's appearance the next morning at the exhibition of water-colours then open.

Though naturally fond of pictures, his interest was plainly centred in the crowd of well-dressed people, who streamed through the rooms in constant succession.

For nearly an hour he stood patiently watching, when suddenly his face lit up with a radiant smile, and he took a hasty step forward.

At the same instant a white-haired, ruddy-faced old gentleman approached, escorting two ladies, one of whom was a young girl.

"Good-morning, Stanhope," he exclaimed heartily, "like myself, eh! doing the pictures. Let me see, you know my wife, and Miss Forrest!"

Maurice returned the gentleman's greeting, raised his hat to the ladies, and plunged hurriedly into a description of the pictures which lined the walls.

Regarded as a novice in the arts of dissimulation, Maurice succeeded admirably in his purpose, for before they reached the third room, he had managed to lose Mr. and Mrs. Kershaw, and had drawn the younger lady into a quiet corner, screened from observation by a broad pillar.

Miss Forrest was a tall, graceful girl, dressed in slight mourning, which she had never wholly discarded since her mother's death, some three years previously.

Her face was pale, the delicate, refined features worn, and the lustrous black eyes which Maurice admitted so much, seemed dimmed, as if with sorrow.

To a practised observer it would have been at once apparent that the girl realised what was coming and dreaded it.

Once or twice indeed she made an effort to escape; but each time, as though swayed by some inward monitor, desisted.

Maurice, meantime, was in torture.

He talked aimlessly and irrelevantly, eager to pour out the story of his love, yet unwilling to risk the possibility of failure.

Did she love him? he asked himself, and

looking into her face, he felt afraid, for there was something in her appearance, which almost forbade him to hope.

That he was not indifferent to her, he felt assured, yet strangely enough, the hopes that had buoyed him up all the morning, suddenly vanished, and even as he began to speak, he knew his suit would be rejected.

But time pressed, Mr. and Mrs. Kershaw might return at any moment, and in a low, rapid tone, he said,—

"Miss Forrest, you must pardon me for entrapping you in this manner, but I wished particularly to speak to you, and could think of no better way. I knew you were coming here this morning, and determined to seize the opportunity. Thus far, fortune has befriended me, the rest lies with you. I think, nay, I am certain, you have guessed my secret. You must have seen that I love you; it cannot prove quite a surprise that I ask you to be my wife. I am far from eloquent I know, unable to turn pretty phrases, or clothe my sentiments in flowery language. I can only say I love you, and will devote my life to your happiness. I am rich and free; I have not a tie in the world, and I love you. Miss Forrest, Nellie, answer me, my darling, just one word."

The girl sat motionless, her pale face, yet paler, and the unbidden tears slowly welling into the saddened eyes.

Maurice looked at her in alarm.

"Forgive me," he cried remorsefully, "I am a brute, I have distressed you, but indeed it was unwittingly, for I would give my life to shield you from pain."

His companion raised her sad wistful eyes to his face, and choking back a rising sob, murmured, like one repeating a distasteful lesson,—

"Mr. Stanhope, you have done me a great honour—the greatest honour, man can pay a woman; pray, believe me, when I say that I appreciate it, it grieves me, more even than perhaps you will think, to cause you sorrow, but I cannot accept the honour you offer me, I cannot be your wife."

"I have been too precipitate," the young man cried, "I should have waited. Nellie, let us forget this; take back your answer. Let me ask you again, when you have had time to consider it. I can wait years if you wish, only give me a little hope."

Once more the girl looked into his face, and though she spoke with a great effort, she said firmly,—

"Oh, Mr. Stanhope, I am so sorry; but indeed—indeed I can give you no other reply. It would be cruel, wicked, to deceive you."

One last despairing trial Maurice made, and though he guessed it not, his words were like a sharp knife, piercing the unhappy girl's heart.

"Nellie! can you not love me one little bit?" he asked, hoarsely.

A sudden spasm of pain contracted the fair face, and a wild longing to pillow her head on his breast, seized the poor distracted girl, but she threw off the feeling and said, bravely,—

"Why prolong this painful scene? you but torture yourself and me to no purpose, for I cannot marry you."

"And your decision is final!" he asked gloomily.

"Yes, and now Mr. Stanhope, if you would do me a favour, take me to Mr. Kershaw and leave us."

That same evening as Mrs. Brandon-Carter was completing her toilette, preparatory to dinner, a note was brought to her room, which made her genuinely unhappy.

"DEAR MARY,"—it ran, "I have acted upon your advice, with the result that I have been refused. It was lucky for me that you did not accept the offer of my yacht, since I am on my way to Southampton, with the intention of making a long voyage. Probably by the time I return, the wound will have healed; at present it is very painful. Yours sincerely,

"MAURICE."

Mrs. Brandon-Carter put the note in her pocket, and sighed gently,—

"Poor old Maurice," she murmured, "he will feel it terribly; I wonder who the girl is."

Meanwhile, Nellie Forrest sat in her pretty chamber, her beautiful face white and tear-stained, and her fair head bowed with unutterable sadness.

To the best of her belief, she had acted in accordance with the promptings of honour, and even now in the midst of her grief her conscience told her, she had done rightly; still it was very painful, and once again she burst into a passionate fit of weeping.

With her own hand she had driven him away, this handsome true-hearted man who loved her so well, she had thrust him from her side, and he would never return.

A fortnight, nay, even a week ago she had looked forward to this very proposal with a thrill of joyous excitement, for she loved this man, whom she had treated so cruelly, and because of her love, she had refused to be his wife.

Since her mother's death Nellie had been very lonely and friendless, for though Mr. Forrest loved her dearly, he was too much immersed in business to be much of a companion to his orphaned child, and latterly she had scarcely seen him, save at rare intervals.

On the last of these occasions, he had told her some bitter news—news which had cast a heavy cloud over the girl's happiness, and which to her childish imagination raised a fatal barrier between her and the man, whom she guessed instinctively wished to make her his wife.

Well, it was over now; she had struck the blow that had ruined her life for ever, for in her heart she knew that in sending Maurice Stanhope away, she was destroying her one remaining chance of happiness.

CHAPTER L

NESTLING at the foot of the Devonian hills and surrounded by some of the most beautiful scenery in England is the picturesque village of Boscombe, encircled by lovely woods, well-kept orchards, and acre after acre of sweet, verdant meadow-land.

Very peaceful and English-like the little village looks, with its neat, trim houses, approached by carefully-tended gardens, with its long straight street through the centre of which bubbles a tiny stream of clear, placid water, and its quaint old-fashioned church, almost hidden by a noble cluster of stately trees.

A little to the right stands the parsonage, a respectable, old-world building, half medieval in its aspect, and lying some distance back on the brow of a hill, one catches a glimpse of Seymour Hall, the residence of the owner of Boscombe. A short, broad carriage drive leads up to the main entrance, and there on this warm, bright, summer's afternoon, a pretty sight presents itself.

Seated at an open window on the ground-floor is a lady, rather frail and delicate-looking, but with a bright, clear complexion, eyes of a deep, blue colour, and possessing an indescribable air of grace and refinement. Just now her cheeks are flushed, and there is a proud, happy look in her eyes, as she glances out on the lawn.

A young girl stands almost beneath the window, holding in her arms, a merry, mischievous-looking lad, about six years old, who, with childish glee, is striving to set himself at liberty.

"Alec," the lady cries from the window, "you must not be so boisterous dear. You will fatigue Miss Forrest; remember she is not very strong."

"Never fear, mamma, when Miss Forrest is tired, we will stop; but we are having such a jolly game," and the girl with a sunny smile towards the open window, protests that he is not tiring her, and the game is resumed with renewed vigour.

The lady is Alicia Seymour, the late John Seymour's widow, and Alec is her only child, who will someday be the owner of the fair domain which stretches away for miles.

He is a bright, frank little fellow, and Nellie Forrest, who is staying at the Hall, partly as Mrs. Seymour's companion, and partly as Alec's

governess, has already learned to love him very dearly.

Presently as the afternoon shadows begin to fall, she takes him to his mother for a farewell kiss, and then hands him over to the care of the nurse.

Three years have passed since Nellie Forrest refused Maurice Stanhope's offer of marriage, and many changes have taken place. Mr. Forrest is dead, and Nellie has accepted the post of companion and governess at Seymour Hall. The girl has grown if possible more beautiful than ever since that memorable day; her figure has become more fully developed; her cheeks have become rounder, and the red tint in them brighter. But a glance at the black eyes reveals the fact, that sorrow and this beautiful girl are not strangers; they possess such an apparent, though unconscious air of sadness.

This is however the only sign. She makes neither moan nor complaint, but does her duty bravely and well, concealing the bitterness of her grief in her own bosom. From her lips, no one had ever learned her secret; since Maurice went away, she had never breathed his name. She was very happy in a passive sort of way at Seymour Hall. Her duties were light, and Alec and his mother—the latter of whom was something of an invalid, had grown quite fond of her.

On this particular afternoon, having transferred the boy to his nurse, she stepped lightly into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Seymour still sat.

"Miss Forrest," exclaimed that lady with a winning smile, "I forgot to mention this morning that my niece, Miss Medway, is coming by the six o'clock train. I had intended meeting her myself, but at present I scarcely feel equal to the effort. Would it be troubling you too much if I asked you to take the ponies round to the station? It would be so much nicer for Blanche."

"Command me, Mrs. Seymour," Nellie replied, "the drive will be delightful, I wish you could come as well. Does John know the ponies are required?"

"Yes! I told him after breakfast."

The elder lady did not notice the momentary shadow of embarrassment which had crossed the young girl's brow, at the mention of Blanche Medway's name, for Nellie instantly banished it. She made no comment to Mrs. Seymour, but ran to her room to dress, and when the ponies were brought round the pleasure of the drive drove all other thoughts from her mind.

It was not until she reached the station and found that the train was not due for another ten minutes, that she remembered the idea which had cast her a passing uneasiness. In the old happy days, before her father's death, even before Maurice Stanhope had brought the sunshine of his love into her life, she had known a Blanche Medway. Were there two girls possessing that name? It seemed to her most probable that the Blanche Medway she had known, was identical with Mrs. Seymour's niece. If this surmise proved correct, the meeting was likely to be an awkward one. Nellie remembered with a sigh, that their positions were no longer the same; she herself was a paid dependant, and although the yoke of her present servitude sat lightly upon her, it was impossible to forget that she was really only a kind of superior servant.

"Well," she reflected, "I have done nothing of which to be ashamed. I was rich and am poor, that is the only difference. It is necessary that I should live, and better honest labour than a miserable subsistence on charity."

Nellie Forrest had no false pride, and if this former friend chose to look down upon her, well, it would be unpleasant, doubtless, but it need not necessarily be humiliating.

However, she would not have much longer to wait. The signal had been made, and already she could hear the whistle of the approaching train.

Presently, it drew up at the side of the little platform, and a few minutes later, a tall stately girl stepped outside and gazed round inquiringly.

Nellie's heart gave a sudden bound as she recognised in this impetuous beauty the friend of her youthful days, and at the same moment Mrs.

Seymour's visitor crossed over to the diminutive carriage.

She was tall above the average; but her figure was beautifully proportioned, and she moved with an ease and grace which astonished as well as delighted the spectator.

She was dressed in a simple, yet effective travelling costume, and the arrangement of her hat allowed one to see a wealth of golden hair. Taken in detail, the features were irregular; but one lost sight of that in the general effect.

The mouth was a trifle large but finely formed, the nose straight with delicately curved nostrils, and her eyes were of a deep clear blue.

Now they lit up with a bright smile as she exclaimed in a ringing musical voice,—

"Am I dreaming, or is it Nellie Forrest?"

Nellie grasped the proffered hand, and all her fears vanished as she gazed into the beautiful face, and listened to the fresh sweet voice.

"It is no dream, Blanche," she said, laughingly. "I am Nellie Forrest, and am come to take you to the Hall. Where is your luggage?"

Blanche looked at the carriage.

"It had better remain in the cloak-room; we shall not have sufficient accommodation here; I have come for a long stay; my aunt can send for it later," and she proceeded to give the groom the necessary instructions.

Retaining only a small hand-bag and one or two packages she entered the carriage, the groom mounted behind, and Nellie turned the ponies' heads.

For a little space neither of the girls spoke, Nellie because she waited for her companion, and Blanche from an undefined fear lest she should trespass upon delicate ground.

They had been very good friends, these two, in bygone years; but something had happened, Blanche scarcely knew what, and Nellie had disappeared.

Blanche Medway was essentially a gentle-woman, and she feared to speak lest by some chance remark she might wound, however inadvertently, her friend's feelings.

Nellie was the first to break the silence.

"Are you not surprised?" she asked. "Confess now, you did not expect to find me at Seymour Hall."

Blanche laughed.

"Well," she answered, "since you desire me to express my opinion, I will own I was rather astonished at seeing you, but you must take into consideration that I know very little of Aunt Alicia."

"Then you were ignorant of the fact that I am staying at the Hall?"

"Yes."

"I have been here some time. I am here in a two-fold capacity, mainly as Mrs. Seymour's companion, and in a minor degree as Alec's governess."

The words were uttered bravely enough, but the girl's brow flushed, and Blanche, who was a sharp, clever woman, understood clearly all that the little speech implied.

She made no verbal remark, but with an impulsive movement, bent over and kissed the girl.

It was a simple act perhaps, but Nellie in spite of her independence felt grateful, and the ice being thus broken, the two were soon chatting freely.

Mrs. Seymour who had been a little uneasy lest Nellie should be embarrassed by her niece's presence, felt relieved to see the friendly terms upon which the girls were.

"Why my dear aunt," said Blanche brightly, "you did not inform me I should meet an old friend here; I little expected to find Nellie under your roof."

"I was not aware you knew each other. Nellie made no remark, when I mentioned your name this afternoon."

"I was not sure," the girl interposed shyly, "and so thought it better to remain silent until I had seen your niece."

"Well, things have turned out very fortunately, for you two will have to depend upon each other for amusement. Unluckily, I am not to be counted, and besides myself there is only Alec. And now, Blanche, unless you are too tired, tell

me all the news. Dinner will not be served for a little time, and as there is no other company, we need not trouble to dress."

Nellie invented a pretext to slip away, leaving the aunt and niece together, and she did not appear again until the dinner-bell sounded.

After dinner they adjourned to the drawing-room and settled down for a comfortable evening.

Blanche's visit proved a welcome change, both to Mrs. Seymour and Nellie. Fresh from the gaieties of London she was able to impart all the most recent news, and listening to her graphic description of the opera, the last play, grand balls and receptions, and the thousand and one odds and ends of fashionable life, the time passed very pleasantly. During a lull in the conversation Mrs. Seymour said, with an arch smile,—

"And what about the *beau cavalier*, my dear. It seems to me that you are keeping him very much in the background. I suppose I ought not to flatter you; but upon my word you must have formed a handsome couple."

Blanche blushed a rosy red.

"My dear aunt," she cried, "you do not really imagine that Maurice submitted to be dragged about to concerts and receptions and all that kind of thing! We managed to keep him a fortnight, and then he vanished. Had some pressing appointment to keep in Tartary or Van Dieman's Land, or some place equally remote."

Mrs. Seymour smiled with an air of superior wisdom.

"Ah, my child," she said, "we must make allowance for the poor fellow; he has never had any ties to keep him at home. Let him rove freely now, very soon he will have but little inclination for wandering. But Nellie, I had forgotten all this must be Greek to you; we are discussing Blanche's lover, she is going to be married shortly."

Nellie forced a smile to her face.

"I am very glad Blanche for your sake, I hope you will be happy."

She could not say any more just then, the subject was naturally distasteful to her, and though she had no suspicion of the truth the name which Blanche had let fall, awakened in her heart the memory of her own blighted hopes.

It was a curious coincidence, and long after retiring to rest that night, she lay awake wondering at the strange chance that the name of Blanche's lover should be identical with that of the man, who had once wished to marry herself.

CHAPTER II.

The first week of Blanche Medway's stay at Seymour Hall passed very pleasantly. The weather continued warm and bright; the country around was clothed in its freshest and most verdant garb, making the excursions, which the girls, sometimes accompanied by Mrs. Seymour and Alec, sometimes alone, took every day, quite delightful.

The old friendship had been rapidly fanned into a new life, partly owing to their being thrown so constantly into each other's society, and the perception on Blanche's side, of the immense difference between their positions.

"Poor Nellie!" she said to her aunt, one afternoon, when they were enjoying a private chat in Mrs. Seymour's room, "I really feel ashamed of being so happy when I think of her. Has she no means at all?"

"I believe not, except the salary she receives from me; I contrive to make it a liberal one."

Blanche kissed the speaker impulsively.

"That is like you," she said, "you are a dear little woman. But how did it happen? It must have been during the year I spent in France. I always regarded her father as a wealthy man."

"I never rightly knew; I was in great trouble myself when she came here, and asked very few questions. She is extremely reticent, and rarely alludes to her former life; but I fear there is some secret sorrow weighing heavily upon her."

"I am certain of it," exclaimed Blanche, "the child nourishes some bitter grief not to be accounted for by the mere loss of money and position; an unhappy love affair most likely, but I do not care to ask her."

"Whatever it may be she conceals it well. It is only at odd moments I can detect its existence."

A day or two after this conversation the girls wandered into the park.

Mrs. Seymour was slightly indisposed, and Alec had been taken across to the Rectory, where there was a host of merry youngsters, with whom he was a warm favourite.

They had just seated themselves under the sheltering branches of a stately tree when Blanche exclaimed, suddenly,—

"Look, Nellie, there is a gentleman coming, who is he?"

Nellie's face reddened with a slight blush as she answered.

"It is Mr. Markdale, our Rector's assistant. He is probably on his way to the Hall; shall I introduce you?"

"Certainly; he is very handsome."

"Yes," a trifle coldly; "many people consider him good looking."

By this time the gentleman had approached quite near, and now made aware of the ladies' presence, he doffed his hat courteously, and half stopped, his eyes beaming with pleasure. He was tall and dark, with short curling black hair, regular features, and bright, sparkling black eyes. His hands were white and shapely, with long, tapering fingers, and he carried himself with the ease and manner of a gentleman.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Markdale," said Nellie graciously, "allow me to introduce Mrs. Seymour's niece, Miss Medway."

The young man bowed with a stately courtesy, and Blanche, who noticed that he evinced no desire to hasten his departure, studied him carefully.

She was a clever girl, and instantly divined what indeed must have been apparent to almost everyone, that her new acquaintance was hopelessly in love with Nellie Forrest.

What Nellie's opinions on the matter were she could not so easily determine. She was evidently aware of the young man's infatuation, but though Blanche watched her narrowly, she could not perceive that she gave him any encouragement.

Mr. Markdale proved very agreeable. He was exceedingly well read, had travelled much, and was able to give a graphic description of persons and places which, delivered in a musical, well-modulated voice, was pleasant to hear.

Presently he looked at his watch, apologized for taking up so much of their time, and bade them "Good afternoon," while Blanche expressed a hope that he would soon favour them with a visit at The Hall.

"I like him," she said decisively, as he passed out of hearing, "he is a true gentleman, and I should say a clever man. Mark my words, our Rector's assistant will yet make his way in the world. You did not tell me his Christian name?"

"Harold."

"Harold! I like that, too; though there is little of the Saxon in his appearance. Does he visit much at The Hall?"

"Oh, yes," with an embarrassed laugh; "he is very fond of Alec."

Blanche preserved her gravity, though she felt seriously tempted to smile at the *naïveté* of her companion's reply.—

"Yes," she said, "I can easily imagine he would be fond of Alec; I should think he would be a great favourite with my aunt."

"Yes, I believe that is so; but if you do not object, we will change the subject. You were going to tell me about yourself, if you remember, and I am curious to learn about your approaching marriage. When is it to be?"

Had Blanche been a man she would probably have expressed her astonishment openly, for hitherto Nellie had always appeared to avoid the subject, as it were; she covered her surprise with a sweet smile, and answered with a pretty confusion.—

"We are to be married at Christmas. Do you remember, Nellie, the compact we once made? I have been thinking of it all the week; and shall hold you to your promise."

Nellie glanced at the speaker questioningly.

"I do not understand," she said. "What promise?"

"That, for which ever was first married, the other should act as bridesmaid. Have you forgotten?"

Nellie's heart beat painfully as she answered,—

"That was simply girls' fun; many things have happened since then."

"Nevertheless, you are going to be my bridesmaid, unless indeed Mr. Markdale should forestall me," she concluded with a merry laugh.

Nellie's face crimsoned and paled alternately.

"I shall never marry Mr. Markdale," she said; "indeed I shall never marry at all."

"Nonsense, Nellie! that is your opinion at present, perhaps; later on you will think differently. But I am sorry you do not like Mr. Markdale, especially as he makes no secret of his own sentiments."

"I do not dislike him. He is a perfect gentleman, and has behaved with great kindness to me. We are good friends, but I shall never look upon him with any other feelings, save those of friendship."

"Well, do not let me distress you, dear, I am always making some stupid blunder. But, to return to our original discussion: you will not run back from your word, will you?"

Nellie hesitated.

"If you really wish it," she said at length, "but have you considered my position? Will it not be rather ludicrous to select your aunt's companion as your bridesmaid?"

Blanche frowned heavily.

"Not another word, my dear, or I shall believe you have learned to despise me."

"But your husband! What will he say?"

Blanche laughed, a hearty, genuine laugh of satisfaction.

"Ah, you do not know Maurice!" and again that odd sensation of pain struck the girl, but she did not interrupt. "He has not one atom of respect for the conventions of society. You are my friend, that will be sufficient for him. But it begins to grow chilly, let us go in. After dinner you shall come to my room, and I will tell you about him."

They dined alone, for Mrs. Seymour, though not seriously indisposed, required perfect rest and quiet, and, after dinner, Nellie followed her companion to the latter's room.

Alec had long since gone to bed, and they were free from any chance of interruption. Blanche drew two chairs to the window, which commanded a fine view of the park, and they sat down.

"It is strange, is it not," mused Blanche dreamily, "how curiously events come about in the world? How I should have laughed, for instance, when I first knew you, had anyone prophesied that the day would come, when I should marry Maurice. You know that my home is in Essex, and Maurice's father owns the next estate. My father and his were very old and firm friends, and though I did not guess it at the time, I know now, their one great hope in life was that Maurice and I would marry each other. We were always good friends in a way, though we held few tastes in common. Maurice was a very awkward boy, but strong and brave, and he did not seem to care for girls. He was a great reader, and I believe, painted a little, but for the rest he was happy only when he was out of doors. He was liked by the gentlemen who visited us, as he could shoot and ride well, but in the drawing-room he did not shine. He cared nothing for music and never danced, while I was passionately fond of both music and dancing. After he came of age I saw but little of him, for he spent most of his time wandering all over the world, and rarely appeared in England. Twelve months ago last Christmas, however, he returned to Essex, and I was surprised to find how much he had improved. Being such near neighbours, we were constantly thrown into each other's company, and a few months before coming here I agreed to marry him. I will show you his photograph; you will be great friends I am sure, when you come to know each other."

The beautiful woman, unconscious of the fearful blow she was about to strike, crossed the room to her private desk, returning with a photograph, which she placed in her friend's hands, while her eyes glowed with a proud smile.

Nellie took the card with a feeling of interest; but as she gazed at the picture of the fine, handsome man it represented she started violently, and a cold chill smote her heart. Her face paled to a deadly whiteness; great dark spots danced before her eyes, her head swam and she felt as if she were going to faint.

Only for an instant, however, Blanche was watching her, she knew, and she must not suspect anything. With one supreme effort she rolled back the stone over the black void into which she had been forced to look. Another time, she exclaimed mentally, she must not give way now; she must be brave. Blanche was waiting for her to speak, eager to hear words of praise of the man she was going to marry.

She forced back the wild rebellious tears that were slowly welling up in the lustrous black eyes; she tried to stifle the beating of her palpitating heart, and looking up with a winsome smile, said,—

"Your lover is extremely handsome, Blanche, I congratulate you. And you are going to be married at Christmas, dear, I hope with all my heart you will be happy; you deserve to be, if only for your kindness to me."

Blanche restored the photograph to its place and sat down, but she did not return to the subject of her approaching marriage. A vague sensation of uneasiness filled her breast, a dim, undefined dread of something wrong, and she wished to be alone in order to think the matter out.

Presently Nellie rose from her chair.

"My head aches, Blanche, and I feel tired," she said, "I think I will go to bed; you will not mind?"

"No dear, a night's rest will do you good, you are looking very pale; perhaps the heat of the sun affected you!"

After she had gone, Blanche returned to the incident of the photograph. What did it mean? she asked herself, and set resolutely to work to provide an answer.

Carefully and in detail she reviewed every event of her visit to Seymour Hall, and every trait of Nellie's behaviour.

She called back to mind her own previously expressed opinion that the girl was suffering from an unhappy love passion, an opinion which had been confirmed by their discussion in the park that afternoon. And now, at the top of this came the girl's embarrassment at the sight of Maurice's photograph. Was there any connection between the two, and if so, what was its nature?

Had she ever met Maurice and loved him? She could not determine, but the matter puzzled her, and when at length she retired to bed, it was with the resolution to find out, if possible, the secret of Nellie's grief, and why she had acted so strangely that night.

CHAPTER III.

MEANWHILE Nellie had gone to her room, with a brain dizzy and confused, and a sensation of bitter misery in her heart.

The old wound which she had fancied completely healed, caused her the most acute suffering.

Ever since that fatal night, she had fought bravely to stifle the love for Maurice Stanhope that burned so fiercely in her bosom, and not without some measure of success.

But the few minutes in Blanche's room had defeated all her well-meant efforts; the sight of the once-familiar features had laid bare the inmost recesses of her own heart, and she was frightened at the terrible power this hopeless passion still retained over her.

What a mockery it all was—what a cruel trick Fate had played her in sending Blanche Medway to Seymour Hall! She remembered her promise to Blanche, and a pitiful smile crossed the white lips. Maurice—her Maurice, the man who had loved her, was going to be married, and she was to assist in the ceremony.

If Blanche knew, would she pity her? But Blanche must never know, never even suspect, the wretched tragedy, the first act of which had been already played. She would summon up her courage and her pride, she would crush this deadly pain at her heart, and mask her features with a smile.

Maurice would not betray her—he was far too noble and generous. It was simple enough, after all. She had but to be circumspect for a time—it would not last long—and a diplomatic illness could prevent her from attending the wedding; then, when they were married and gone away to their beautiful home, she could nurse her sorrow in silence.

Poor little girl! It seemed hard that she should have all the dreary work to go over again, with nothing but hopeless misery at the end of it; but she was brave and stout-hearted, and confronted the prospect steadily. She had fashioned her own destiny. Three years previously, with calm deliberation and of set purpose, she had chosen to banish happiness from her life for a chimera. Of her own free will she had selected an existence, unbrightened by the sunshine of love; and, if her reasons had been founded upon an unsubstantial basis, she herself was alone to blame.

She undressed slowly and crept into bed, to seek relief for a brief space from the trouble that weighed so heavily upon her.

At breakfast the next morning Blanche gave her a curious, searching look, but made no remark, save to ask whether she had recovered from her sudden indisposition.

"Quite, thanks," Nellie answered, brightly: "I have had a good night's rest, and feel all the better for it."

Mrs. Seymour, who had by this time joined them, glanced across the table anxiously.

"Have you been unwell?" she asked.

"The merest trifle, I assure you. The sun yesterday afternoon was too hot for me, and in the evening I turned slightly dizzy—nothing more."

"You do not take sufficient care of yourself, my dear, and I am afraid Alec tries you a great deal. Blanche and I will take him for a drive this morning; the exercise will do you good; and you shall remain quietly at home."

In vain Nellie protested, with a merry laugh, that there was really nothing the matter with her. Mrs. Seymour remained obdurate, and it was finally decided that Blanche should drive Alec and her aunt to Lady Clancy's.

It so chanced that the road to Pentmarts, Lady Clancy's residence, ran straight past the Rectory gates; and in the old-fashioned garden, reclining at full length in the shade cast by a sturdy apple-tree, lay Harold Markdale, smoking his morning pipe.

At the sound of carriage-wheels he raised himself indolently, and was rewarded by catching a brief glimpse of Blanche and Mrs. Seymour, with Alec perched comfortably between them.

Instantly a complete change came over the young man. All his languor vanished, and he walked briskly towards the house, with an air of resolute determination on his handsome face. After a few moments he reappeared, and, closing the gate softly, bent his steps in the direction of the Hall.

Nellie was at home by herself, which was an opportunity not to be neglected. He strode along swiftly, as though fearful of losing a single second. He was a gallant-hearted lad, and he loved this dainty maiden with a pure and unselfish affection. How could he guess that, at this very instant, she was making use of her liberty to sit with folded hands and sad, wistful eyes, dreaming of a love she had vainly tried to conquer.

"Mr. Markdale!" She rose with a start, and, though her face flushed, her emotion was not caused by love.

"Good morning," she said, sweetly, though with a little tremor in her voice, which Harold interpreted wrongly; "I am sorry you should have missed Mrs. Seymour and her niece; they have gone for a drive, tempted by the beauty of the morning."

"Yea, I saw them pass the Rectory; that is why I am here."

She could not misunderstand him; she could not affect to do so. All the love of his great honest heart was shining in his eyes, and illuminating his face. She saw that his limbs trembled, that his hands shook with the tension of his passion, and her heart grew sick within her.

Into her brain the thought flashed with the swiftness of light. Why could she not love this man, whose splendid physical gifts were equalled only by his nobility of soul? That he loved her she did not doubt, and she honestly liked and respected him, but she would never feel for him as a wife should feel for her husband.

The temptation was strong, horribly strong; in his love she would find a refuge, a haven of safety, from the wild perilous seas over which she was voyaging; he would shelter her from all danger, he would be loyal and true; little by little, perhaps his tender care would bind up the poor broken heart; heal the cruel gaping wounds which were slowly dragging her to the grave. Would it not be madness to throw away such a love as this, and for what? Maurice was nothing to her, could be nothing to her, henceforth but a name. Already he was betrothed, soon he would be the husband of another woman, and this wretched mocking passion, which filled her breast with torture, would be a crime.

For the second time in her short life she held her destiny in the hollow of her hand. She had wrecked it once, would she wreck it again? If she married him might not love follow? She respected and esteemed him now; might not these seeds ripen into the fruits of affection?

Even as she put the suggestion, her natural truthfulness rejected it with scorn. Her heart had passed from her keeping; she was no longer its mistress; how could she contemplate such an awful lie as to marry this man, while every fibre of her being hungered for Maurice.

During the course of this mental struggle, Harold stood watching her with an uneasy feeling in his breast, but he had come with the settled resolve to learn his fate, and now he said timidly,—

"Miss Forrest, have I offended you by my arrival? I trust not, for I would not willingly grieve you. I think you guess the reason of my visit. Ever since you came to Seymour Hall I have loved you, and I have never cared to conceal it. To me you are the one woman in the world. Nay, hear me to the end," for the girl tried to interrupt him, "I will not detain you long. I am not wealthy, though I have sufficient means to keep you in comfort if not in luxury. I am young, with fair prospects in life, and I love you with my whole soul. Nellie, I am pleading for the happiness of a man's life, for without you the world's greatest gifts will be but as fruits which turn to ashes in the mouth."

The girl's face was very white, and she could not restrain the sorrowful tears which flowed from her eyes.

"I am so grieved," she cried, "that this should have happened, for I respect and admire you as a true and honourable man. More than that I cannot say. It would be wicked to deceive you, to hold out hope where no hope is, for though I like you very much, and am proud of your friendship, I do not love you in the way you desire, and never shall. I will be perfectly open with you; you shall learn what I have never before confided to a single human being. Before I came to Seymour Hall I met a gentleman who asked me to be his wife. I loved him, Mr. Markdale, passionately, but for a foolish reason—at least it appears foolish to me now—I refused to marry him. Mr. Markdale, I love him now, and until my dying day, that love will abide with me. I tell you this partly to show you how hopeless is your quest, but particularly because I value your good opinion. I do not wish you to think badly of me, to picture me as a woman who would willingly trifl with a man's affections. Am I perfectly understood?" she asked wistfully. "I do not, indeed I do not wish to lose your friendship."

Harold Markdale had not moved while she was speaking. The light had gone from his eyes; the colour from his cheeks, and his blood had grown chill in his veins, for the blow she was dealing was no ordinary one. During those last few moments he realised how closely his love for this beautiful, sad-eyed girl was bound up with his life, and the sense of desolation which her answer gave him was appalling in its intensity. But he was a brave man and made no sign of the agony he suffered.

Taking one of the fair white hands in his, he said reverently,—

"I will not insult your intelligence by affirming that I am not grievously disappointed by your answer, but this I will say. Although my love for you is stronger now, if that be possible, than before, I recognise that it is hopeless, and will accept my dismissal loyally. I thank you for your confidence, for it shows you trust me. That I should ever cease loving you is, I am afraid, an impossibility, but I will lock the passion in my own breast, and endeavour to hide it even from you. One other thing let me say, and then I will go. Should the time ever come (though, for your sake, I trust it will not) when you need a friend, remember that Harold Markdale, without hope of fee or reward, will cheerfully lay down his life to serve you."

"May Heaven bless you!" she murmured brokenly, and stopped; she could add nothing further; the words choked in her throat.

He raised her slender fingers to his lips, and kissed them humbly, then with a final farewell he left the room slowly, and wandered with unsteady footsteps into the park.

Nellie sank back into the chair from which she had risen.

She had dreaded this interview for weeks; she had watched the flame of love burning in the man's eyes, and knew that the day must shortly come when he would avow it openly.

It grieved her gentle spirit to inflict such pain, and on that day especially, when the bitterness of her own sorrow was so great, her sympathies went out for the stricken man.

Still, it was over now, and she even felt some little relief in thinking that the ordeal to which she had been looking forward was past.

And Harold, what of him?

The bright sun shone in a cloudless sky; the birds whistled gaily in their airy bower; the grand old earth was clad in a garb of summer beauty, but he headed them not.

For him just now the world was a desert waste, for he had staked his life's happiness on the acquisition of a girl's love—and lost.

Harold Markdale still lives; he has not falsified Blanche's prophecy, for his name is enrolled amongst the list of our best and noblest, but he has never forgotten that terrible morning, when he wandered like a blind man in the grounds of Seymour Hall, and, strong man though he was, cried aloud in his agony.

CHAPTER IV.

SEVERAL days had elapsed since Nellie refused Harold Markdale's offer, when one morning, Blanche, who appeared in unusual spirits, startled her companion with the announcement that Maurice Stanhope was expected that afternoon.

Nellie felt that her face flushed, but she stealed her nerves, and masked her real feelings so well that Blanche was almost deceived.

"He is bringing a friend with him," she continued, "a Mr. Ferris, a stranger to us, but someone apparently for whom Maurice entertains a great liking. They are coming by the three o'clock train, and Aunt Alicia wished me to meet them. By the way, have you heard that Mr. Markdale is leaving Boscombe? It is rather sudden, is it not? but he has accepted the offer of a curacy in London. The Rector is in despair, but I think he is acting rightly, he is far too good to bury himself in a place like this—do you not agree with me?"

"Yes, he is capable of better work than can be performed here."

The girl did not flinch, though in her heart she knew herself to be the cause of his hasty departure, and the knowledge grieved her.

"Whatever it may be she conceals it well. It is only at odd moments I can detect its existence."

A day or two after this conversation the girls wandered into the park.

Mrs. Seymour was slightly indisposed, and Alec had been taken across to the Rectory, where there was a host of merry youngsters, with whom he was a warm favourite.

They had just seated themselves under the sheltering branches of a stately tree when Blanche exclaimed, suddenly,—

"Look, Nellie, there is a gentleman coming, who is he?"

Nellie's face reddened with a slight blush as she answered.

"It is Mr. Markdale, our Rector's assistant. He is probably on his way to the Hall; shall I introduce you?"

"Certainly; he is very handsome."

"Yes," a trifle coldly; "many people consider him good looking."

By this time the gentleman had approached quite near, and now made aware of the ladies' presence, he doffed his hat courteously, and half stopped, his eyes beaming with pleasure. He was tall and dark, with short curling black hair, regular features, and bright, sparkling black eyes. His hands were white and shapely, with long, tapering fingers, and he carried himself with the ease and manner of a gentleman.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Markdale," said Nellie graciously, "allow me to introduce Mrs. Seymour's niece, Miss Medway."

The young man bowed with a stately courtesy, and Blanche, who noticed that he evinced no desire to hasten his departure, studied him carefully.

She was a clever girl, and instantly divined what indeed must have been apparent to almost everyone, that her new acquaintance was hopelessly in love with Nellie Forrest.

What Nellie's opinions on the matter were she could not so easily determine. She was evidently aware of the young man's infatuation, but though Blanche watched her narrowly, she could not perceive that she gave him any encouragement.

Mr. Markdale proved very agreeable. He was exceedingly well read, had travelled much, and was able to give a graphic description of persons and places which, delivered in a musical, well-modulated voice, was pleasant to hear.

Presently he looked at his watch, apologised for taking up so much of their time, and bade them "Good afternoon," while Blanche expressed a hope that he would soon favour them with a visit at The Hall.

"I like him," she said decisively, as he passed out of hearing, "he is a true gentleman, and I should say a clever man. Mark my words, our Rector's assistant will yet make his way in the world. You did not tell me his Christian name."

"Harold."

"Harold! I like that, too; though there is little of the Saxon in his appearance. Does he visit much at The Hall?"

"Oh, yes," with an embarrassed laugh; "he is very fond of Alec."

Blanche preserved her gravity, though she felt seriously tempted to smile at the naïveté of her companion's reply.—

"Yes," she said, "I can easily imagine he would be fond of Alec; I should think he would be a great favourite with my aunt."

"Yes, I believe that is so; but if you do not object, we will change the subject. You were going to tell me about yourself, if you remember, and I am curious to learn all about your approaching marriage. When is it to be?"

Had Blanche been a man she would probably have expressed her astonishment openly, for hitherto Nellie had always appeared to avoid the subject; as it was she covered her surprise with a sweet smile, and answered with a pretty confusion.—

"We are to be married at Christmas. Do you remember, Nellie, the compact we once made? I have been thinking of it all the week, and shall hold you to your promise."

Nellie glanced at the speaker questioningly.

"I do not understand," she said. "What promise?"

"That, for which ever was first married, the other should act as bridesmaid. Have you forgotten?"

Nellie's heart beat painfully as she answered,—

"That was simply girls' fun; many things have happened since then."

"Nevertheless, you are going to be my bridesmaid, unless indeed Mr. Markdale should forestall me," she concluded with a merry laugh.

Nellie's face crimsoned and paled alternately.

"I shall never marry Mr. Markdale," she said; "indeed I shall never marry at all."

"Nonsense, Nellie! that is your opinion at present, perhaps; later on you will think differently. But I am sorry you do not like Mr. Markdale, especially as he makes no secret of his own sentiments."

"I do not dislike him. He is a perfect gentleman, and has behaved with great kindness to me. We are good friends, but I shall never look upon him with any other feelings, save those of friendship."

"Well, do not let me distress you, dear, I am always making some stupid blunder. But, to return to our original discussion; you will not run back from your word, will you?"

Nellie hesitated.

"If you really wish it," she said at length, "but have you considered my position? Will it not be rather ludicrous to select your aunt's companion as your bridesmaid?"

Blanche frowned heavily.

"Not another word, my dear, or I shall believe you have learned to despise me."

"But your husband! What will he say?"

Blanche laughed, a hearty, genuine laugh of satisfaction.

"Ah, you do not know Maurice!" and again that odd sensation of pain struck the girl, but she did not interrupt. "He has not one atom of respect for the conventions of society. You are my friend, that will be sufficient for him. But it begins to grow chilly, let us go in. After dinner you shall come to my room, and I will tell you about him."

They dined alone, for Mrs. Seymour, though not seriously indisposed, required perfect rest and quiet, and, after dinner, Nellie followed her companion to the latter's room.

Alec had long since gone to bed, and they were free from any chance of interruption. Blanche drew two chairs to the window, which commanded a fine view of the park, and they sat down.

"It is strange, is it not," mused Blanche dreamily, "how curiously events come about in the world! How I should have laughed, for instance, when I first knew you, had anyone prophesied that the day would come, when I should marry Maurice. You know that my home is in Essex, and Maurice's father owns the next estate. My father and his were very old and firm friends, and though I did not guess it at the time, I know now, their one great hope in life was, that Maurice and I would marry each other. We were always good friends in a way, though we held few tastes in common. Maurice was a very awkward boy, but strong and brave, and he did not seem to care for girls. He was a great reader, and I believe, painted a little, but for the rest he was happy only when he was out of doors. He was liked by the gentlemen who visited us, as he could shoot and ride well, but in the drawing-room he did not shine. He cared nothing for music and never danced, while I was passionately fond of both music and dancing. After he came of age I saw but little of him, for he spent most of his time wandering all over the world, and rarely appeared in England. Twelve months ago last Christmas, however, he returned to Essex, and I was surprised to find how much he had improved. Being such near neighbours, we were constantly thrown into each other's company, and a few months before coming here I agreed to marry him. I will show you his photograph; you will be great friends I am sure, when you come to know each other."

The beautiful woman, unconscious of the fearful blow she was about to strike, crossed the room to her private desk, returning with a photo-

graph, which she placed in her friend's hands, while her eyes glowed with a proud smile.

Nellie took the card with a feeling of interest; but as she gazed at the picture of the fine, handsome man it represented she started violently, and a cold chill smote her heart. Her face paled to a deadly whiteness; great dark spots danced before her eyes, her head swam and she felt as if she were going to faint.

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"Your lover is extremely handsome, Blanche. I congratulate you. And you are going to be married at Christmas, dear, I hope with all my heart you will be happy; you deserve to be, if only for your kindness to me."

Blanche restored the photograph to its place and sat down, but she did not return to the subject of her approaching marriage. A vague sensation of uneasiness filled her breast, a dim, undefined dread of something wrong, and she wished to be alone in order to think the matter out.

Presently Nellie rose from her chair.

"My head aches, Blanche, and I feel tired," she said. "I think I will go to bed; you will not mind?"

"No dear, a night's rest will do you good, you are looking very pale; perhaps the heat of the sun affected you!"

After she had gone, Blanche returned to the incident of the photograph. What did it mean? she asked herself, and set resolutely to work to provide an answer.

Carefully and in detail she reviewed every event of her visit to Seymour Hall, and every trait of Nellie's behaviour.

She called back to mind her own previously expressed opinion that the girl was suffering from an unhappy love passion, an opinion which had been confirmed by their discussion in the park that afternoon. And now, at the top of this came the girl's embarrassment at the sight of Maurice's photograph. Was there any connection between the two, and if so, what was its nature?

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The girl's face was very white, and she could not restrain the sorrowful tears which flowed from her eyes.

"I am so grieved," she cried, "that this should have happened, for I respect and admire you as a true and honourable man. More than that I cannot say. It would be wicked to deceive you, to hold out a hope where no hope is, for though I like you very much, and am proud of your friendship, I do not love you in the way you desire, and never shall. I will be perfectly open with you; you shall learn what I have never before confided to a single human being. Before I came to Seymour Hall I met a gentleman who asked me to be his wife. I loved him, Mr. Markdale, passionately, but for a foolish reason—at least it appears foolish to me now—I refused to marry him. Mr. Markdale, I love him now, and until my dying day, that love will abide with me. I tell you this partly to show you how hopeless is your quest, but particularly because I value your good opinion. I do not wish you to think badly of me, to picture me as a woman who would willingly trifl with a man's affections. Am I perfectly understood?" she asked wistfully. "I do not, indeed I do not wish to lose your friendship."

Harold Markdale had not moved while she was speaking. The light had gone from his eyes; the

colour from his cheeks, and his blood had grown chill in his veins, for the blow she was dealing was no ordinary one. During those last few moments he realised how closely his love for this beautiful, sad-eyed girl was bound up with his life, and the sense of desolation which her answer gave him was appalling in its intensity. But he was a brave man and made no sign of the agony he suffered.

Taking one of the fair white hands in his, he said reverently,—

"I will not insult your intelligence by affirming that I am not grievously disappointed by your answer, but this I will say. Although my love for you is stronger now, if that be possible, than before, I recognise that it is hopeless, and will accept my dismissal loyally. I thank you for your confidence, for it shows you trust me. That I should ever cease loving you is, I am afraid, an impossibility, but I will lock the passion in my own breast, and endeavour to hide it even from you. One other thing let me say, and then I will go. Should the time ever come (though, for your sake, I trust it will not) when you need a friend, remember that Harold Markdale, without hope of fee or reward, will cheerfully lay down his life to serve you."

"May Heaven bless you!" she murmured brokenly, and stopped; she could add nothing further; the words choked in her throat.

He raised her slender fingers to his lips, and kissed them humbly, then with a final farewell he left the room slowly, and wandered with unsteady footsteps into the park.

Nellie sank back into the chair from which she had risen.

She had dreaded this interview for weeks; she had watched the flame of love burning in the man's eyes, and knew that the day must shortly come when he would avow it openly.

It grieved her gentle spirit to inflict such pain, and on that day especially, when the bitterness of her own sorrow was so great, her sympathies went out for the stricken man.

Still, it was over now, and she even felt some little relief in thinking that the ordeal to which she had been looking forward was past.

And Harold, what of him?

The bright sun shone in a cloudless sky; the birds whistled gaily in their leafy boughs; the grand old earth was clad in a garb of summer beauty, but he needed them not.

For him just now the world was a desert waste, for he had staked his life's happiness on the acquisition of a girl's love—and lost.

Harold Markdale still lived; he has not falsified Blanche's prophecy, for his name is enrolled amongst the list of our best and noblest, but he has never forgotten that terrible morning, when he wandered like a blind man in the grounds of Seymour Hall, and, strong man though he was, cried aloud in his agony.

CHAPTER IV.

SEVERAL days had elapsed since Nellie refused Harold Markdale's offer, when one morning, Blanche, who appeared in unusual spirits, startled her companion with the announcement that Maurice Stanhope was expected that afternoon.

Nellie felt that her face flushed, but she steadied her nerves, and masked her real feelings so well that Blanche was almost deceived.

"He is bringing a friend with him," she continued, "a Mr. Ferris, a stranger to us, but someone apparently for whom Maurice entertains a great liking. They are coming by the three o'clock train, and Aunt Alicia wishes me to meet them. By the way, have you heard that Mr. Markdale is leaving Boscombe? It is rather sudden, is it not? but he has accepted the offer of a curacy in London. The Rector is in despair, but I think he is acting rightly, he is far too good to bury himself in a place like this—do you not agree with me?"

"Yes, he is capable of better work than can be performed here."

The girl did not flinch, though in her heart she knew herself to be the cause of his hasty departure, and the knowledge grieved her.

"It seems a pity too," Blanche murmured, "he is exceedingly popular, and Aunt Alicia, I know, was looking forward to presenting him with the living, as the Rector is expecting preferment shortly."

Nellie inclined her head but did not answer, and Blanche, slightly puzzled, returned to the subject of Maurice's approaching visit.

As the day wore on, Nellie slipped away to her room where she spent a great portion of her leisure time in literary work.

This afternoon, however, she found it impossible to concentrate her attention, and drawing a chair to the window she gave herself up entirely to reflection.

Now this visit was so imminent she felt restless and excited.

Maurice was coming, and her heart beat so that she could not control its throbbing.

She would see him again—the man she loved so fondly, and in the pleasure of the thought she almost forgot the inevitable pain which must attend their meeting.

Presently she heard the sound of the carriage-wheels, and peeping cautiously out she saw Mrs. Seymour and Blanche, and on the opposite seat two men, one of whom was Maurice.

Mindful of her guests' comfort Mrs. Seymour had ordered the dinner to be put forward an hour and when the second bell rang Nellie went downstairs, resolved to face the coming ordeal, as stoically as she could; Mrs. Seymour had not yet descended, but Blanche was in the drawing-room, and with her the two gentlemen.

Maurice was the first to notice her, and Blanche seeing the sudden colour in his face turned swiftly.

"Oh, Nellie," she cried, with a little laugh "you quite startled me. Allow me to introduce the friends of whom I spoke, Mr. Maurice Stanhope, Mr. Richard Ferris—Miss Forrest."

By this time Maurice had recovered his composure, and with a low bow he stepped forward.

"Unless I am much mistaken," he said courteously, "an introduction in my case is unnecessary. Surely in addressing Miss Forrest, I am speaking to an old friend."

Nellie forced a smile, she must perform her part somehow.

"I am glad to be remembered," she said softly, "it is long since I met you."

Mrs. Seymour's entrance spared Maurice the necessity of framing a reply, and had Blanche's suspicions not previously been aroused the incident would have passed unregarded.

In spite of the awkwardness of the situation, dinner passed quite pleasantly, for Maurice exerted himself to the utmost, and his friend, as though conscious that his services were needed, seconded him ably.

In the eyes of most people the latter was a handsomer man even than Maurice. Not quite so tall as his friend, his figure was admirably proportioned. He had a well shaped head, and his hair, which he wore long and wavy, was of a peculiar yellowish tint, which suited his fair complexion to perfection. His eyes, like Blanche's were of a deep blue colour, and a heavy moustache, of the same hue as his hair, shaded his upper lip. His features were refined and intelligent, and he possessed that indecorous tone of birth and good-breeding, which is so difficult to be acquired.

Nellie took little part in the conversation, but contented herself with watching Maurice, and wondering at the change which had taken place in him. Not that his appearance had materially altered, since the days in which she had first known him. His face was a trifle more bronzed and he had grown a little stouter; otherwise his physical aspect remained the same. But his manner was different, he had lost his old shyness and air of restraint, which had been habitual with him, and he bore himself with the ease and grace of a cultured and polished gentleman.

After dinner when they adjourned to the drawing-room, Mr. Ferris' stories proved so attractive that no one thought of music, and finally, when the party broke up for the night, Nellie felt a sensation of amazement at the little embarrassment she had experienced.

Several days glided smoothly by and Maurice

made no sign. Perhaps it was best so, and yet the girl's heart hungered for a few words which should show her that she had not been forgotten.

One morning, while busy writing in her room, she had occasion to go to the library for a reference book. The others had gone, she understood, to the Rectory, and as far as she knew, no one but herself and the servants were in the house. Opening the door hurriedly, she entered the room, when to her astonishment Maurice Stanhope rose from before the table, which was covered with letters.

"I am sorry to have interrupted you," she exclaimed, awkwardly. "I had no idea you were here."

"It is of little moment, I had just finished; can I assist you in anyway?"

"Thank you, I came to look for a book; ah! here it is," and she reached down a ponderous tome from the shelf.

He glanced at the volume with an amused smile.

"I had no idea you were an antiquary," he said, for the book in question was an ancient history of the county, "may I ask what object you can have in perusing such dry stuff as that?"

Nellie blushed furiously.

"I am writing an article on Broadwick Castle, and I require some information which is to be found here."

"Don't you think," he continued, persuasively, "that the morning is much too fine to be wasted in that manner? I am going for a stroll in the park, will you not come with me?"

Her heart beat violently; she felt she would be putting herself in a false position to accompany him, and yet, on the other hand, if she refused, might he not draw a wrong inference from her action?

Maurice noted her hesitation.

"Come," he said, gently, "you owe me this at least."

Nellie reflected a little longer. Why should he wish for her company? Was he desirous of re-opening the old question, or of discovering whether she had unfolded their secret to Blanche? This last thought decided her. It was absolutely necessary to come to some determination on that point at all events.

"I will fetch my hat," she said, "and join you in a few moments."

Maurice left the house with a thoughtful expression on his handsome face, and for some time after Nellie joined him, walked on without speaking. The mere presence of this girl kindled in his brain a passion which all Blanche's beauty had never been able to arouse. He was a strong man and could be trusted to keep his feelings well under control, but ever since his arrival at Seymour Hall, he had realised that the old love which he had imagined dead, was as active as ever.

As an honest and upright gentleman he scorned himself for what he deemed his treachery, but he could not blind himself to the fact, that the whole love of his heart was given to this girl, and not to the woman he was about to marry.

"Nellie!" he asked, suddenly, "has Blanche told you?"

"Yes! she has begged me to be her bridesmaid."

"Then she is ignorant of what happened three years ago!"

"Did you think I had told her?" with a little ring of scorn in the sweet voice.

"No! but I thought she might have suspected something; she is very sharp. When you sent me away," he continued, dreamily, "life seemed very dreary and hopeless. I wandered about from one place to another, striving with all my might to banish your image from my heart. On my return to England—a weary, dispirited man, I met Blanche whom I had known as a girl, and asked her to marry me. The wedding is to take place at Christmas."

"So I understood from Blanche," the girl replied quietly, "I hope your life will be a happy one."

He turned upon her almost fiercely.

"Nellie," he cried, "will you tell me why you wrecked my life? I think I am entitled to learn that, for I could swear you loved me once."

For a minute or two she made no reply, she was busy endeavouring to calm the beating of her fluttering heart. Presently she said timidly,

"We need not discuss that now. My reason for refusing your offer, was a very simple, and in my eyes conclusive one. A few days before you asked me to become your wife, I became aware of something which appeared to me of the greatest importance. Until then, I had always considered myself to be the daughter of a wealthy man, and when I learned that my father was on the verge of ruin, and perhaps even worse, I felt it incumbent on me, to decline your offer."

Maurice groaned aloud.

"Do you mean," he said, incredulously, "that you sent me away because your father was no longer rich?"

"Because he was a ruined man!" she answered calmly, "was not that sufficient reason?"

"And that accounts also for your presence here?"

"Yes! when my father died, which was shortly after—the events we have been discussing, I gave up his property to his creditors, I turned my attention to earning a living, and paying his debts—nearly £5,000; that is why I bury myself in my room, and write."

"My poor girl! my poor foolish girl!" he cried, "why did I not know? why did you not confide in me?" and he bowed his face on his hands.

Presently he spoke again.

"Say nothing to Blanche of our secret. Nellie; it can do no good; she need never suspect anything, and now let us return."

They walked back to the house in silence, and parted at the door, Nellie to go to her room, and Maurice to wander on blindly anywhere, so that he might be alone with his thoughts.

He felt that it was impossible to face Blanche and her aunt just yet, he must have time to digest this strange revelation, and to work off the excitement into which it had thrown him.

That he had made a fatal mistake in supposing he had conquered his passion for Nellie was evident, and he felt convinced that his love was returned, but he did not swerve in his loyalty to Blanche.

It was all a miserable mistake, but the girl to whom he had plighted his troth should not suffer.

He knew now that he could never give her his heart as he ought to do, but he would devote his life to her happiness, so that she should not know the difference.

Then his thoughts went back to the foolish child whose strained notions of honour had wrecked two lives.

His heart bled for her; the dreary misery of her lonely, loveless future rose up before him in all its naked sadness, until he longed to go and clasp her in his arms and comfort her.

The dinner-bell had sounded when he came back to the Hall, but by that time he had schooled his features well, so that neither Blanche nor her aunt suspected what misery lay beneath his placid exterior.

Only Ferris, who understood his moods, noted the look of relief which momentarily crossed his face when he heard that Miss Forrest was not coming down, and that gentleman kept his own counsel.

CHAPTER V.

It was the morning after the painful interview recorded in our last chapter, and all the inmates of the Hall, save Nellie, still lingered in the drawing-room.

"Miss Forrest appears exceedingly busy," remarked Mr. Ferris to Blanche, who answered with a smile,

"Did you not know Miss Forrest was an authoress? you must ask her to show you her novel."

"Has she written one?" Maurice inquired carelessly.

"Yes! I think it delightful, and now the silly girl is afraid to send it to a publisher; she says

it is sure to be rejected ; I really do wish she would let you read it, I am confident you would admire it."

"We must make use of Mrs. Seymour, perhaps her good offices would secure us the privilege."

"That is a capital notion," exclaimed Blanche, "Auntie, try and induce her to bring it down this evening, there's a dear."

Mrs. Seymour willingly agreed to do her best, and after much coaxing Nellie was persuaded to submit her manuscript to the general criticism.

Had she been aware that Mr. Ferris was himself a writer of no mean talents she would probably have withdrawn her consent even at the last moment, as it was she reluctantly allowed him to take the closely-written sheets from her hands.

Richard Ferris was a good elocutionist ; he read with feeling and expression, and as the story proceeded, his audience listened with ever-increasing interest.

It was a powerful novel, dealing with the analysis of the human heart, and when at length —warned by the lateness of the hour—the reader paused, Nellie was overwhelmed with conglutinations.

"It is very fine writing, my child," said Mrs. Seymour, wonderingly, "but how did you obtain all that knowledge ? I thought no one could rightly describe a great sorrow, who had not— who had not first suffered deeply."

This was the point which puzzled Richard Ferris.

He had begun the story with little idea of being interested, and was amazed at the wonderful skill and knowledge it displayed.

"That girl must have had a bitter experience," was his comment as he closed his door, "I wonder what Maurice knows about her !"

Maurice could have told him they had been listening to the cry of a tortured soul.

He knew intuitively that the graphic description of the sufferings which had impressed them, was but the pale reflection of the misery which Nellie herself had undergone, and his heart ached.

For several evenings the reading continued and on the last night Mr. Ferris said,—

"I do not wish to flatter you, Miss Forrest, but in my opinion you have achieved a distinct success. I should imagine you would have little difficulty in securing a publisher."

The girl's eyes shone with pleasure ; but she answered thoughtfully,—

"I am really so ignorant, I scarcely know how to proceed."

"Will you trust it to me ?" asked Maurice, "I am going to London in a day or two, and I have some influence with one of the great publishing firms. A personal interview might tend to facilitate matters."

"Thank you ; you are exceedingly kind to take so much trouble, and I will gladly avail myself of your offer."

"Then that is settled ; and now you have only to wait until the book is published to find yourself famous."

Nellie shook her head.

"I don't expect that, I shall be satisfied with a very moderate portion of success."

Maurice's business in London and his acquaintance with the publishers were alike mythical, but knowing how hard the girl was battling to clear off her father's debts, he determined to publish her book at his own expense if he found such a proceeding practicable.

"Good-bye !" he exclaimed gaily some days later, "keep a good heart until I return."

The morning after his departure, Blanche and her aunt were sitting in the latter's room.

Mr. Ferris had taken advantage of his friend's absence to visit some neighbouring relatives, and Alice had coaxed Nellie into going for a ramble.

Mrs. Seymour looked troubled.

"Blanche," she said hesitatingly, "have you noticed anything particular lately in Mr. Ferris's manner ?"

The girl looked up in astonishment.

"What a peculiar question !" she exclaimed, "why do you ask ?"

"Forgive me, my dear, if what I say appears

ridiculous, but unless I am greatly mistaken he is brewing much trouble for himself."

"In what way ?"

"Can you not guess ? Certainly the old saying is correct—'The onlookers see most of the game.' Why, child, the man is falling hopelessly in love with you."

"Nonsense, auntie ; he knows I am engaged to Maurice ; we are excellent friends but that is all."

"Well, my dear, I trust you are right, and no doubt he would be indignant at my suspicions ; still for all that, consciously or unconsciously, the man is learning to love you."

"You exaggerate my charms, auntie ; remember everyone does not regard me from your standpoint."

Mrs. Seymour did not contest the matter, and the subject dropped, though she did not relinquish her opinion.

In truth she had a vague feeling of uneasiness, a notion that something was wrong, and it made her uncomfortable, though she could not clearly define the reason for her alarm.

Meanwhile Maurice was vigorously prosecuting his self-imposed task, and at the end of the week he returned in triumph, having succeeded in finding a publisher for Nellie's book.

"By the way," he said, "I met Ferris in London, on his way to the North. I am afraid we shall miss his society for a little time ; one of his relatives—an uncle, I believe he said—is dangerously ill. He wished me to convey his apologies to you, and his thanks for your hospitality."

Mrs. Seymour and Blanche exchanged hasty glances ; the same thought had occurred to both, but Maurice was serenely unconscious of the effect his words produced.

"It's an awful nuisance," he continued, "I reckoned upon his accompanying me to Myson's tomorrow ; now I shall have to go alone."

Fantastic as her aunt's suspicion appeared to Blanche, it had not been without foundation.

Every day at Seymour Hall was plunging Richard Ferris more and more deeply in love with his friend's betrothed bride, and he had gladly seized the first pretext to tear himself loose from a temptation which assailed his honour and his happiness alike.

The day after Maurice's return passed quietly and uneventfully. He himself had gone directly after luncheon to his friend, Sir George Myson's, Nellie, fired by the glowing account he had brought back concerning the probable success of her book, had busied herself all day preparing the outlines of a fresh story, leaving Mrs. Seymour and her niece to entertain each other.

As they did not expect Maurice to return until after midnight the ladies retired to rest early, only Nellie, instead of seeking her bed, sat down once more to her desk.

Everything was perfectly still, scarcely a sound disturbed the quietude of the night as she sat, pen in hand, jotting down the ideas and fancies which floated through her brain.

Suddenly she paused and listened, thinking she heard a step in the corridor. She crossed the room and looked out, but all seemed silent and deserted.

Returning to her chair she endeavoured to recommence her work, but her nerves were flattened and she could not write.

Presently it came again. She could not be mistaken, the creaking of footsteps moving stealthily about the house. Though nervous and excitable, Nellie was by no means deficient in courage, and she instantly resolved to ascertain the reason of the unusual noise.

Re-opening the door quietly, she stepped outside and listened.

For the moment all was silent, and she was about to return when the sounds, which had previously arrested her attention fell upon her ears, but much more distinctly and as if approaching in her direction.

Fortunately she had closed her door, so that the passage was in total darkness. Holding her breath and pressing closely against the wall, she waited for what might happen.

Nearer and nearer the sounds came, until now she could distinguish plainly that they were

caused by two men stealing cautiously along the passage.

Now they were exactly opposite her, and at that very instant, by some unlucky mischance, the skirts of her dress rustled against the wall.

The sharp ears of the men detected the noise, and, before she could recover from her alarm, Nellie found herself confronted by a blinding light, and heard the surly growl of a man's voice.

The surprise was so startling that for a brief space the frightened girl stood irresolute.

Then the thoughts flashed into her mind that these men were thieves who had by some means gained admittance into the house, and were even now engaged in carrying away their plunder.

It was a risky thing perhaps to do, but without pausing to consider the consequences she made a dash at the man's lantern overturned it, and sped away in the darkness, calling aloud for succour.

Fearful of being trapped the man did not attempt to pursue her, but hurried off in the opposite direction, where they knew they would find means of exit.

By this time the inmates of the Hall were aroused from their slumbers, doors were hastily opened, and Nellie had the satisfaction of knowing that the men-servants were hurrying from their rooms.

Strong now in the belief that all danger was past, she retraced her steps, and clutching the lamp from her chamber, hastened to the staircase by which the men must necessarily have disappeared. As she stood holding the light above her head, the report of a pistol, followed by a cry of pain reached her, and her heart grew sick with terror, for she recognised Maurice's voice.

Still carrying the lamp, she ran down the stairs into the lower passage. Her suspicion proved correct. There was the open window which had afforded the robbers means of ingress, but her sharp eyes noticed that they had not availed themselves of it for the purpose of escape.

At the end of the passage was a small door standing slightly ajar. It was evident that having effected an entrance into the house, and before proceeding with their nefarious designs, they had opened this door in order to secure an easy mode of exit, in case of emergency.

The girl's heart beat violently, and her bosom heaved as she moved towards the open door.

What had happened ? What was the meaning of that wild cry even now ringing in her ears ? Maurice was hurt, perhaps dead ! She forgot for the moment all that had happened during the last three years. She remembered nothing save that the man she loved was lying somewhere near, wounded maybe to death.

The night was dark but still, and her lights flamed bravely as she darted hither and thither, searching for that which she dreaded to find.

Presently, with a cry of anguish, she stopped. There in front of her, he lay motionless ; the gallant-hearted man who had once loved her so fondly. His face was deathly pale, his lips white, and oozing slowly from his breast was a tiny stream of blood.

Placing the lamp on the ground she bent softly over him. She pressed her warm lips to his and kissed him passionately, but he made no sign.

"Maurice," she cried, "my love, my darling, speak to me ! It is Nellie, Nellie who has loved you always. Open your eyes, Maurice, and look at me. Oh, my beloved, I have killed you !"

Clearly, as though she had witnessed the whole tragedy, she realised what had occurred. On returning to The Hall Maurice must have heard her cries, and catching sight of the retreating figures have attempted to stop them.

The thought condemned her ; unconsciously and indirectly she had sent him to his death.

When the affrighted domestics, led by Mrs. Seymour and Blanche, arrived upon the scene, they found her stretched across the body of the wounded man ; she had fallen senseless.

Of all the party, Blanche alone retained her self-possession.

"Take a horse and fetch the nearest doctor," she said, addressing one of the men, "and one of you girls help me raise Miss Forrest : she has fainted." Jackson, to the butler, "run for some

brandy and a spoon, and some of you fetch the invalid couch from Mrs. Seymour's room."

By the time that Jackson came back, Nellie had recovered consciousness, and leaving her to Mrs. Seymour's care, Blanche was busy trying to ascertain if the wounded man had been indeed stricken to death.

From time to time she forced a little stimulant between his clenched teeth, and gradually a faint tinge of colour crept into the white cheeks and a tremulous movement showed itself in the ashen lips.

Then, as they raised him carefully on to the couch, the frank, blue eyes opened for a second, and she murmured softly,—

"Thank Heaven, he is not dead!"

CHAPTER VI.

BLANCHE, who had naturally assumed the direction of affairs, dismissed the majority of the servants to bed, having first despatched another messenger to hasten the doctor who arrived shortly afterwards, when the two girls went upstairs leaving Mrs. Seymour and the house-keeper to assist him.

A strange silence had fallen upon them, and neither made any reference to the tragedy which had just been enacted. Only once Nellie murmured, as if to herself,—

"If he dies, I shall have sent him to his grave."

It was a terrible trial having to wait there passively for the doctor's fiat. Presently they heard his steps, and opening the door, Blanche beckoned him into the room.

"Now, doctor," she said, briskly, though her courage almost failed her, "what is your report? Will your patient die? Do not be afraid, we shall not make a scene."

Dr. Pym looked at her with a smile.

"My dear young lady," he said, genially, "I have no doubt you would receive the worst news with a brave face, but fortunately there is no need to test your courage. I am glad to say Mr. Stanhope is in no danger whatever; the wound is not a serious one. I have extracted the bullet and, with the exception of weakness consequent upon the loss of blood, there is very little damage done."

Nellie burst into a flood of tears, but Blanche made no sign save for the happy light in her eyes and just a suspicion of faltering in her voice as she bade the doctor "good night."

For two or three days Maurice lay downstairs in the chamber where they had first carried him, but after that time the doctor allowed him to be removed to his own room, where he was sedulously attended by Mrs. Seymour.

Meanwhile Nellie went about her work in a mechanical way, her heart full of a new trouble. What had she said or done on the night when Maurice had been hurt? Had she betrayed her miserable secret? She could not remember; but it seemed to her that in the last few days there had come about a decided alteration in the relationship between herself and Blanche.

With the exception of telling her story of the robbers—who, by-the-way, had secured very little booty—first to Mrs. Seymour and afterwards to the police, she had not mentioned the subject, and Blanche, on her side, had shown equal reserve.

As yet Mrs. Seymour suspected nothing. To her Nellie's action appeared perfectly natural, and she attributed her fainting to the excitement of her over-wrought nerves.

But Blanche had not been deceived for an instant. One glance on that terrible night into the girl's eyes had been sufficient to assure her of the real state of Nellie's feelings, and she knew not what course to pursue. If Nellie was in love with her own betrothed husband—and of this she felt quite certain—then there must be some secret which she did not understand. Did Maurice know? Did he approve of it? Was her first suspicion that there had been a previous intimacy between these two a correct one after all?

These and a thousand similar questions flitted through her brain. They forced themselves upon

her in the presence of the sick man, and she even carried them to bed at night. How should she act? What was her right course?

The question puzzled her, for it was impossible to decide upon anything until she knew Maurice's true sentiments. Yet she could not go to him, and say, "Maurice from what I have seen, I believe Nellie Forrest is in love with you; what are you going to do about it?" She recognised that such a proceeding would be mere childish folly.

But she must do something. She must discover the truth! She did not like to consult her aunt, and there remained only Nellie.

One day when the doctor announced that his patient might leave his room for a few hours in the afternoon Blanche made up her mind. Whatever the result she would speak to Nellie; she would lay bare her suspicion and request either a confirmation or denial of it.

Then with the truth before her she would know better how to act.

It was a strange mission truly; but she could think of nothing else, and for her own peace of mind it had become absolutely necessary that she should get to the bottom of the matter.

She found Nellie at her desk ostensibly writing, but the ink on her pen was long since dry, and the sheet of paper bore but a few straggling hieroglyphics.

She raised her eyes to welcome her friend, but lowered them again instantly, and her face crimsoned, for she divined instinctively the reason of Blanche's visit.

"Dr. Pym has just gone," the latter commenced, "and Maurice is to come into the drawing-room after luncheon; is not that good news?"

"It is indeed. I breathe more freely every time I hear he is progressing towards recovery, the more so as I feel that but for my stupid conduct, he would never have been hurt."

"Oh! that is simply a morbid idea! It never entered into his head. He calls you a plucky girl for venturing into the corridor."

"Nevertheless, I shall always charge myself with being the cause of his wound."

"Well, after all it matters little now, as he will soon be quite well and strong again. But I did not come to talk about that, I have a question to ask, Nellie, will you answer it?"

Strive as she might Nellie could not control her features; she trembled violently, and the colour died out of her cheeks.

"My dear," continued her companion softly, "give me your confidence; believe me it will be better so. You know I am your friend, your true friend, there should be no secrets between us. Will you not trust me dear?"

Nellie burst into tears.

"Why do you talk of secrets?" she cried, "I can read in your face that you know all I have to tell. Is it a right thing, Blanche, to take advantage of my weakness, and to wield your knowledge as an instrument of torture? Have I not suffered enough, think you? Think of all that has happened during your stay here. Call back to memory the forced smiles, the fictitious gladness, the simulated laughter which I have placed at your command, and try to realise that they have all proceeded from a broken heart. Have I not done sufficient? Day after day I hugged more closely the wound that was killing me, and made no sign, because I would not mar your happiness. Was it my fault that overstrained nature broke down at last and revealed the miserable secret which I hid so carefully from you? And I have done you no harm, I have been loyal to you in thought, word, and deed, and now, now, you come—Blanche I cannot bear it," and the tears, she had stoutly forced back, broke out afresh.

"Hush dear, I have not come to chide you, why should I? Surely it is no crime to love Maurice! But cannot you see, child, how delicate is my position? This man is my affianced husband. In a short time we are to be married. Is it not better that I should know the truth now than afterwards? Surely I am not making an unreasonable request!"

Nellie moaned.

"What is it you wish?" she cried, "you have the story of my shame, is it such an uncommon one as to excite comment? I will not deny that

I love your betrothed husband; it would be useless. What then? am I the first girl who has carried a hopeless passion to the grave?"

"My poor child, you are but adding to your sufferings. I am going to put one simple question. Where did you first meet Maurice?"

Nellie hesitated. Two courses lay open to her. To decline answering, or to speak the truth. Which should she choose?

She thought not of herself but of the man she loved, and the mental vision of his frank open face decided her.

"Blanche," she murmured, "before I tell you my story, let me say that no thought disloyal to you has entered my head, since Maurice Stanhope has been in this house."

The other kissed her.

"I know your true heart," she said, "I know there can be no question of that."

Then she sat down, holding one of Nellie's hands in hers, while the trembling girl related all that had passed between her and Maurice.

"But that was three years ago," she concluded with a sorrowful smile, "and I thought I was learning to live it down. Do not be angry with me dear, he loves you now, and you will marry him, and be happy. Someday, when Time, the great healer has performed his task, I shall come to you and say, 'I have conquered the past, all is well with me now.' Until then you will bear with me, will you not?"

Blanche drew the girl's head to her bosom and kissed her tenderly; then with a cheerful smile she said,—

"Now I must leave you for a space, I have many things to do."

The duties to which Blanche referred were however, apparently of a nature which did not require immediate attention, for she went straight to her room, and sat down.

Although Nellie's revelation had not been entirely unexpected the shock was still severe, and she required time to collect her thoughts.

She was a brave, high-spirited girl to whom a mean action was an impossibility and finding herself in a difficult situation she determined to face it unflinchingly.

Without being untrue to herself or to her own interests she must endeavour to view this matter as it would appear to others.

And first with regard to Nellie, who, in sending Maurice away, had essayed a task beyond her strength! Not only had she miscalculated her own powers of endurance but the force of her love, which Blanche saw clearly would cease only with her death.

Then she thought of Maurice. Was it possible that his love for the girl was really dead, or had he deceived himself?

He had accepted his dismissal and gone away in what was perhaps, after all a vain attempt to forget her.

The more she pondered, the more unlikely it appeared that his passion had really been extinguished.

So truly had she learned to know his strong nature, and the tenacity with which he clung to his purpose, that she felt it difficult to believe that his former love had done more than slumber—and if so what was her duty?

Ought she to hide this knowledge in her own breast and marry him as though nothing had occurred to interrupt their engagement? And if she decided otherwise, was she strong enough to make the sacrifice?

Strong as she was, the magnitude of the results dependent upon her decision frightened her.

It behoved her to act warily, for she held in her hands, the happiness of three peoples' lives. She would put a hypothetical question.

Suppose she never married Maurice! would her life be necessarily wasted?

Her conscience answered "No."

She had for him a feeling of the highest regard, and in a sense loved him; but she admitted that her passion was feeble, compared with Nellie's.

Then her duty became clear; if Maurice really loved her; if his affection for Nellie had become a thing of the past, she would be his wife, and devote her life to his happiness; but if she found

that he was nursing this new love at the expense of the old, she would give him back his promise, and set him free.

Having formed this resolution she dismissed the subject from her mind until the afternoon, when Maurice was to make his reappearance for the first time.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN Blanche entered the drawing-room she found Maurice comfortably seated in a spacious easy-chair and apparently deeply interested in her aunt's conversation.

He smiled pleasantly and held out his hand.

"Pardon my lack of courtesy," he said, "but the exertion has tried me more than I should have thought possible."

She took his hand for a moment, and then placed a chair on the opposite side of the fire-place.

Nellie had not appeared at luncheon, on the plea of a bad headache, and Mrs. Seymour, thinking the lovers might desire to be alone, proposed to go and see her, a course which met with her niece's secret approbation.

Having made up her mind to seek an explanation from Maurice, she determined to take the opportunity thus offered, though she felt the nature of the interview would be much more disagreeable than that of the one she had recently gone through.

Maurice watched her with a peculiar sensation.

Her face was so frank and open, so little used to concealment or dissimulation that it formed a sort of mirror to reflect the thoughts which flitted through her mind.

Presently, summoning all her courage to her aid, she said with a little tremulous trill in her voice,—

"Maurice, I wish to ask you something of importance; will you promise not to be angry with me? It may cause you pain, I do not know, but even if it does, it is necessary that the question should be put."

The young man grew uncomfortable, and moved restlessly in his seat.

(Continued on page 68.)

THE SECRETS AND SHADOWS OF CASTLEGRANGE.

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CHAPTER XLIV.

"MISS FAIRBURN, will you marry me?"

Mr. Aragon was obliged to repeat his extraordinary question before the actual force and sense of it could make their way into my brain. I was really so amazed, so staggered—as Bertie would have said—that for moments afterwards I could do naught but gaze at him, speechless. At last I stammered incredulously,—

"Do you positively mean it? Can you really be in earnest? And—and have you spoken to Julian about it, Mr. Aragon?"

"Let us have one question at a time," he said, smiling gravely. "In the first place, then, I do mean it—most sincerely; it would be strange indeed, surely, if an honourable man could jest upon the subject now between us! Secondly, I have not yet spoken to Mr. Tressilian; though I suppose I ought rightly to have done so before asking the all-important question of you to-night."

"You have taken me so completely by surprise, Mr. Aragon—that is the truth—I hardly know what to say."

"Take you by surprise, have I? Then I am afraid that you do not care for me," said he quietly.

"Oh, no!" I told him at once, frankly enough.

This seemed to me, however, an instant afterwards, both rude and unkind; and I therefore hastened to add in palliation,—

"I mean, of course, not as one ought to, if—if one meant to—to—"

"Marry the person," he finished drily—"eh?"

"Y—ea."

"Could you not in time learn to care a little for me?"

"I—I do not know; but I—I am afraid not," I answered, now thoroughly ill at ease in this most unlocked-for situation. "I never even dreamed of it, you see."

"It is the unforeseen, they say, which always comes to pass."

"It seems so, indeed!" I sighed.

"Let me tell you something else, may I, before we continue the subject?"

"Oh, yes; if you please!"

"Well, I thought last year, do you know, that you loved Bertie. As it proved otherwise in the end, and that you did nothing of the sort, I determined that I would speak out on my own account, and tell you that I loved you, when next chance or fate should throw us together."

Something like a little harassed moan broke irrepressibly from my lips. I shook my head faintly. I beat my hands softly together in the sweet gray dusk of the pleasure. But Mr. Aragon appeared to notice neither my little inarticulate cry nor the gesture of refusal and discontent which had accompanied it; for he said as composedly as ever,—

"I am no longer poor and unknown, remember, Miss Fairburn. Both fame and money are now mine; and the great world, with its adulation, is at my feet. Miss Fairburn, what is your answer?"

"Oh, I do not know what to say!" I cried, desperately upset. "I must first of all speak to Julian on the matter, and—be guided by his advice. He will know what is best for me. At present, it all sounds and seems so odd—so unlikely—so unsatisfactory in every way—"

"I am sorry you feel like that," he observed regretfully. "It does not convey to one a sense of much hope. Yet, perhaps it is because you think that I am too old to address you in this wise; and possibly the world would remind you that I am old enough to be your father—"

"It is not that—believe me, I was not thinking of that," I interrupted miserably.

"No? Well, perhaps you object to—other things. For instance, I grant that you are acquainted with few enough particulars of my past life; though I dare say you are not unacquainted with the circumstance that I have already been married before? It was long years ago now, when I was just a lad—certainly not more."

"I—we—yes, we have always imagined so, it is true; because of the wedding ring that you habitually wear upon your little finger," I murmured, heaving the deepest and forlornest of sighs.

"Yes," mused Mr. Aragon aloud, as he moved the poor little worn golden hoop slowly round and round the lean brown finger it now encircled—"this was my poor young Dove's wedding-ring, Miss Fairburn. She wore it for scarcely a year! We were only boy and girl in those vanished days; and, like many another too-youthful pair in this sad world, in marrying early, nay, in marrying at all, we made a fatal blunder!"

"Yes?" I put in listlessly. "Tell me about it, then; it will interest me, I know, Mr. Aragon."

"Shall I? After all, there is little to tell—it won't take long," he said, regarding me gravely in that calm, intent way of his. "Do you know," he added, with a somewhat quizzical smile, "that you puzzle me, Miss Fairburn? I am uncertain as to whether I should hope or despair."

"Oh, never mind now," I said, shrinking from him nervously as he came a half-step nearer to me and laid his hand upon my arm. "As I told you, I—I must consult Julian first; and—and, besides, it is growing late, Mr. Aragon. And remember, I am still waiting to hear that story of your past which you were about to tell me a moment ago."

"Ah, true," he answered courteously; and

forthwith, without further preface, he gave me the following sketch of his earlier days.

How little did we either of us dream just then of the dramatic surprise reserved for us at the end of the story.

The father of George Aragon—so his only son was now explaining to me—had been a poor gentleman and an unsuccessful painter before him.

After his father's death, his mother having died years before, he went to lodge with an old man, named Simeon Carey, who kept a second-hand *bric-a-brac* shop in the crowded region lying somewhere between Wardour-street and Soho-square.

His grand-daughter Dove, who was some few months the junior of George Aragon, lived with old Simeon Carey, and looked after her grandfather's house; an attic of which, with a convenient wide skylight in it, served as a studio for the ambitious young Aragon.

The two young people thus thrown together had early become lovers; the morose yet wise old grandfather, however, disapproving of the intimacy, though he did not actually forbid it. People could not marry on nothing—a-year, he said sourly—they were only boy and girl who as yet did not know their own minds.

But one day something dreadful and totally unexpected happened. The old carioche died suddenly; they discovered him sitting dead in his chair in the shop.

Then Dove Carey, like young Aragon himself, was bereft of all earthly tie; and, with him, she now stood utterly alone in the world.

What was to become of her—a girl not yet seventeen! The shop and its heterogeneous contents were sold after the funeral, to discharge current debts; and when everything was paid off, and the new tenant of the *bric-a-brac* shop had taken possession, Dove Carey found herself a capitalist of some fifty odd pounds. Young Aragon had managed to save ten.

"Dove," said he, "you are alone in the world; and so am I. We must marry—marry, I mean—directly—and make our home with each other. We love each other, so why not?"

"Why not? Oh, I don't know! But grandfather used to say that you were only a boy, and I was only a girl. He sneered at the idea of our marrying," she murmured evasively.

"We shall grow older," suggested young George.

"I have fifty pounds—you have only ten," she grumbled then.

He winced; but replied cheerfully,—

"I shall soon catch you up, though, if I work hard; and in another year, perhaps, we shall be putting money into the bank. Who knows?"

She seemed curiously reluctant to accede to his proposal; and there was evidently something in the background—some reason she was keeping to herself, George saw.

"I am ambitious as well as you," she confessed at last, after much coaxing from her lover to be frank with him; "and I want to get on in the world, and be heard of everywhere, and talked about by everyone, and admired, and flattered, and to see my portrait in the illustrated papers, and in the photographers' windows in Regent-street and Piccadilly," she confessed further, growing more bold now that the ice, as it were, was once broken.

"Well, I am really a painter by profession, you know," George Aragon said earnestly, "whatever queer things I may be driven to do with pencil and brush for a living, just in the present. And some day, Dove—I swear it—I will paint your portrait, in the garb of a Moorish Princess, say, or something like that, which would suit you splendidly; and you shall be hung on the line at the Royal Academy, with perhaps a crimson cord in front of your picture, and a big policeman to say 'Pass on' and regulate the gaping crowd. Would not that satisfy you, Dove?"

"Ah, some day, you say!" sighed she. "I know of a shorter and surer way to fame than that. I should like to go on the stage."

Young George looked at her with dismay—horror almost. He was very young; but he had lived all his life in London; and in some things he was old for his years.

Yet his knowledge of the world, of life in a great city, lad as he was, had sobered and saddened him—not detested him.

"Anything but that, Dove," he said; and had pleaded with the girl more earnestly than ever. But it was uphill work. She wanted to be known and talked about in London, she persisted; and here, far more so than his, seemed the easiest and the pleasantest method of quickly arriving at the goal in view.

Moreover, was not there in her favour her great musical gifts—her ear being true, and her cleverness undeniable?

She could play and sing indeed, reading correctly at sight, a few girls of her age and limited opportunities were ever known to do.

Furthermore she possessed, in a remarkable degree of excellence, another distinct gift—two or three of her young lover's favourite poems and ballads had Dove Carey already set to music of her own composition.

Everyone who heard it went wild over the pathetic little minor air she had made to

"Thou art lost to me forever—I have lost thee, Isadore,"

and agreed that it was worthy of publication and being given to the judgment of the world at large.

Had not George himself said the same thing, often and often, and promised to call in her behalf on a well-known firm of music-sellers in Oxford-street?

He knew that he had—he could not gainsay it! Yes, Dove felt that the stage, the musical stage, was her real vocation; and George was stupid and selfish and cruel to thwart so obstinately her reasonable ambition.

Her heart was set upon it, she averred, tearfully one moment, passionately the next—and would never, never change!

Young Aragon and his love, however, prevailed in the end; and Dove Carey relinquishing Heaven knew how unwillingly, her dream of stage triumphs and the coveted publicity of the photographers' windows, the boy and girl lovers became husband and wife.

They occupied a couple of rooms in the vicinity of Soho-square, and for the first two or three months seemed tolerably happy together; but after a while the health of the youthful husband broke down, and he had a long and an expensive illness, owing entirely, the doctor said, to over-work, anxiety, lack of fresh air and neglect of proper exercise.

It was a gloomy time—but the wolf must be kept from the door, the family pot kept boiling somehow. The hoarded ten pounds vanished first; the fifty followed, melting by degrees. Dove herself, too, was ailing at this time, in anticipation of early motherhood; and she grew fretful, dissatisfied, injured in look and tone, soon openly reproachful—in brief, insufferable with her taunts and her tears, and most difficult to live with patiently.

"If I had only done as I wished, and gone on the stage, and not listened to you, all this would never have happened," she sobbed. "I wish with all my heart and soul, George, that you and I had never met! I do! Grandfather was right, after all!"

He recovered his strength slowly, and tried to work; but he had no heart for it, no energy, no hope; and work he could not. He went among the music-sellers and endeavoured to get a hearing for his wife's little songs; but chagrin, rebuff, failure, humiliation, met him at every turn.

Dove meanwhile grew worse and worse, equally in health and in temper. Her upbraids and recriminations were not only cruel—they were bitterly unjust; and sometimes, under the scourge of sore provocation, men are not exactly angels. Young Aragon's forbearance did at last give way, then fierce quarrels ensued.

When her baby was born, her life was despaired of from the first; and within ten days or so after its birth, the hapless young mother lay dead on her bed—words of bitterest lamentation and regret upon her lips almost to the last.

So at eighteen years old George Aragon had found himself alone again, and a widower; but now with a dark-eyed, dark-haired baby daughter

—poor Dove's only legacy—cast upon his sole care and love! What to do with his child, now that Dove was gone—how to rear it as it should be reared, soothe it, dress it, feed it—he knew no more than the unfortunate infant itself.

In the evening of the day on which Dove Aragon was buried, young George sat by the desolate hearth with his puny baby upon his knees. The fire, what there was of it, had sunk into ashes—the grate was cold and gray. The nurse had gone home, saying significantly, with her head round the door, that she would look in in the morning for the trifle that was then due to her from the gentleman.

George, broken in spirit, wretched, helpless, friendless, wondered drearily where "the trifle" was coming from. He had no money; absolutely none; the undertaker's bill—which he had been required to pay in advance—had swallowed up his last sixpence that afternoon.

It seemed, then, that there was now before him nothing but starvation or the workhouse. Which should it be for himself and for his child?

He sat on by the empty grate far into the night; brooding there upon the awful helplessness and loneliness of his position; and heard the first small hours of another day clang dully from a clock in a neighbouring spire in Soho—and then he arose from the cold hearth side, his determination taken, his mind made up. He would trust blindly to the mercy of Heaven rather than to that of his fellow men!

He wound and clasped closely around the tiny wrist of the sleeping babe a slender hair bracelet which had once belonged to Dove's mother; that mother, for a whim, having had the bauble woven from a lock of her daughter Dove's own dark hair, and the snap of it finished off prettily and appropriately with a silver pendant in the form of a small bird, bearing in its beak an olive leaf. Dove herself had sometimes worn the hair bracelet, but she had set little store by it as an ornament. Had it been fashioned in gold and precious stones, that indeed would have been a different matter!

"If in the years to come, we should ever again find each other, my little one," the poor young father said brokenly, "I shall know you by this! It will be enough."

Then he wrapped the sleeping child warmly and tenderly in a shawl of its dead mother's, and went forth with his unconscious burden into the black rawness of the wintry dawn; for it was moist and heavy November weather; and fog, like an icy shroud or pall, enveloped the great still city.

He wandered hopelessly, aimlessly onward until he found himself at length in the wide and silent thoroughfares of a south-western district—he could not remember how he had got there; he knew not where he was when there.

In the dim gray light of early morning which wrestled for mastery with the clinging chill fog-friend, he could just discern that the houses looming around him were of the spacious and stately order—mansions of the wealthy, in short.

"There is luck in odd numbers, they say; and eleven, I have heard, is a lucky number," George Aragon muttered. "I will count eleven porticos from this lamp-post at the corner; and there at the eleventh . . . my own child . . . my poor little motherless daughter, will we say goodbye? Heaven knows, dear little one, whether or not upon this sad earth we shall ever meet again! . . ."

Up to this point Mr. Aragon had told the story of his early manhood in concise, straightforward sentences, yet not without a note of stern pathos here and there, I while listening to him with eager attention, losing never a word of the bitter narrative.

He was proceeding, however, in a more discursive style, to relate what strange experiences, what cruel hardships, what buffettings of fortune generally had befallen him after his desertion of his baby-daughter on that dim raw November morning some nineteen years or so gone by, when my ill-suppressed excitement broke its bonds, and I seemed to astonish my tall companion very much indeed by interrupting him without ceremony and crying out breathlessly:

"But—but—oh, Mr. Aragon, in all the long years which have elapsed since that unhappy

time, surely you have sometimes endeavoured to find out what kind of fate it was which befell your child after you had seen fit—deemed it better and kinder—to abandon her to the unknown mercy of the world!"

He regarded me for a moment or two with intense gravity, smiling a little at last, and saying,

"You take me, I fear, Miss Fairburn, for a monster of iniquity. Believe me, I am not so bad. Heaven knows how often since that forlorn November day I have done my utmost, all a man could, I think, to atone for the sin of my youth—that mad unpardonable act conceived and committed in an hour almost of delirium, certainly of darkest affliction and despair! If I have tried once, I have tried a hundred times over to find again the square, and the identical portico in it, wherein I had deposited, so unnaturally and so heartlessly, as you may say, my poor motherless babe. In vain! I could never in the least remember whither I had wandered, by what dim thoroughfares I had strayed forlornly, with the sleeping child held to my breast, throughout the cruel, lagging hours of that fog-laden wintry dawn—"

Again I interrupted him unceremoniously; I could not help it. My very finger-tips were tingling and quivering with excitement.

"Mr. Aragon," I said, trying hard to speak coherently and soberly, "thank you—thank you very much for your confidence, for telling me your sad life-history. And now—and now, if you please, I must leave you for a little while. I want to run back to the house—I will not be a minute!"

"I will accompany you. As we go, you can tell me whether—"

"No, no, no!" I stopped him once more, "you must remain here. I pledge you my word, Mr. Aragon, that I will return soon. The rest—other things, you know—can wait."

"The rest! Other things! But surely, Miss Fairburn, you will let me have some sort of answer to-night to the question I asked you half-an-hour ago?"

"I am coming back—I am coming back!" was all that I called out to him, however. And before he could utter another word of protest I had left him standing there, solitary and perplexed, by the sundial in Dame Lucy's garden, and was running fleetly myself towards the shadowy entrance of the courtyard. The clocks were chiming half-past ten; the mild summer moon was riding high above the chapel cloisters. It was a serene, lovely night.

Felicia and Bertie, side by side, were strolling up and down the grass-plot of the quadrangle. The old still fountain gleamed ghostly. The end of Bertie's cigar burned redly in the soft gloom. The tender heavenly strains of Julian's beloved Mozart came out to us with sweet distinctness from the piano in the baron's hall.

I went straightway up to Felicia; and hardly knowing what I did, I fell upon her shoulder and clung to her, laughing and crying at once with joy and excitement together.

"Felicia, darling," I blurted forth—"I—I have found your father! He is waiting for you—waiting for you this very minute, Felicia—by the sundial in Dame Lucy's garden. I have just left him there!"

Bertie Wilford burst out laughing.

"Are you cracked, Hebe, or simply acting the lunatic to amuse us?" said he, in his customary frank way.

"Bertie," I answered, with reproachful solemnity, "never in my life was I more in earnest. I have told you only the wonderful truth."

Felicia herself meanwhile had turned exceedingly pale. She was grasping one of my wrists with both hands in her agitation.

"Yes—you do mean it," she said, trembling perceptibly—"I can see that you do. It is very strange; I cannot—I dare not yet believe it. Take me to him, nevertheless—Oh, Hebe! I think I begin to understand. Can it be possible, really possible, that—that—"

"If it comes to that, you may take us both to him, Hebe," Bertie put in with consummate coolness; "for whithersoever Felicia leads, I for the future follow cheerily. The stranger, se-

matter whence he has sprung so miraculously, may as well make the acquaintance of his prospective son-in-law, Herbert Wilford, at the same moment that he clasps to his bosom his long-lost daughter Felicia Luck!"

"Oh, Bertie dear—Felicia dearest—is that really so?" I cried, in a hysterical key. "How glad I am to hear it—oh, how glad! I knew that it would come to pass in time—yes, I knew it, and said so, Felicia!" And then, quite regardless of Bertie's presence, Felicia and I fell to embracing each other again and again, with kisses, laughter, and happiest tears commingled.

"But I say, Hebe, where's Aragon got to?" exclaimed Bertie, glancing around the moonlit quadrangle. "Has he taken himself off to the caravan without letting me know? It's hardly like him."

"Oh, I fancy he's about somewhere," I cried evasively.

I hurried them round by the shrubbery-path to the pleasure before the astonished Bertie could ply me with any more questions. Mr. Aragon's tall figure still stood motionless there in the moonlight by the old dial; one elbow now resting in thoughtful fashion upon the moss-green face of it.

Felicia, with a little faltering cry, ran forward to the quiet figure. Mr. Aragon looked up. He must have wondered greatly what we were all of us doing there—when he wanted, was waiting for, only me!

He was waiting for a wife, as it were; and I had found and brought back to him his daughter! That daughter, in her turn, had brought with her, to introduce to him, her own future husband—her lover now, and his own familiar friend!

"Mr. Aragon," I announced triumphantly, "here is your long-lost child. We have found her, you see, at Castlegrave; and amongst us she is known as Felicia Luck!"

"By Jove!" ejaculated Bertie, himself coming nearer and staring with all his might—"I was right, then, after all. Hebe is decidedly cracked—now there is no mistake about it. Why, the man is George Aragon!"

CHAPTER XLV. AND LAST.

By the evening of the next day we had had time to get over—at any rate, in a measure—the great surprise of the foregoing night.

So in Felicia—and, seeing that in her babyhood she had been given no other name, Felicia she would remain to the end of the chapter—George Aragon providentially had found his own child, whom, in the darkest and heaviest hour of his life, nineteen years before, he had lodged unwittingly upon the hospitable doortape of the Honourable Tabitha Graham's mansion in South Kensington!

In his despair he had trusted blindly to the mercy of Providence, and Providence had not failed him in that dark hour.

And now Bertie, it appeared, was going to marry Felicia, and so become the son-in-law of his own familiar friend; and should I, I wondered almost apathetically, find myself ultimately the step-mother or mother-in-law of Felicia and Bertie!—which truly was the funniest idea of all!

And to-night I had promised to give Mr. Aragon his final answer—"Yes" or "No."

"Surely in twenty-four hours you can make up your mind!" he had said courteously. "I will be at the old dial in the pleasure again to-night, at ten o'clock. Come to me there with your answer, will you, Miss Fairburn?" And with a sigh of half-surrender I had promised him that I would.

"Oh, what would prove to be the end of it all? Nobody else wanted me—that was plain; therefore I might just as well marry George Aragon as not, since he seemed to desire it sincerely.

In the interim Mr. Aragon had duly spoken to Julian; and, as with Bertie last year before him, he had obtained my kinsman's sanction to win me if he could.

After dinner Felicia and Bertie wandered off into the forest—to fetch a novel from the

caravan, they said innocently; Mrs. Joyce, as usual, betook herself with a newspaper to her pet couch and corner in the baron's hall; and I, leaving Julian and Mr. Aragon together, stole away unobserved up to our boudoir in the tower, there to linger alone, harassed with a thousand conflicting fears and fancies, until it should be time to go forth and meet Mr. Aragon by the ancient dial in Dame Lucy's garden.

At ten minutes to ten I went down softly and passed out into the midsummer darkness, if darkness it could be named, which filled the grassy courtyard with pale amethystine shadow. Utterable dejection filled my soul; my cold hands were clasped before me as I walked—moving forward as one might move on the slow, doomed way to the scaffold.

When I came to the old lilyed fountain the sight of a dark object lying prone there upon the grass by the marble basin, forced me to start back a pace in sudden fear.

But immediately afterwards I discerned that the object in question was in reality the body of a man; in another instant I knew that it was Julian Trellian himself—no other—who was lying there helplessly before me.

I ran forward then and knelt upon the grass by his side, and raised his head to my knee, and smoothed back the dark hair from the white forehead, and called him tenderly by name. I guessed that he had merely fainted; and as the fountain was fortunately quite near, I dipped my handkerchief into the cool water of it and moistened his lips and brow.

Soon then he opened his eyes languidly, murmuring to himself as he did so—not yet knowing me—"Hebe . . . my love, my darling . . . By this time she is gone to him—is with him—already, perhaps, has given him the answer he desires . . . and I, poor wretch, desolate and unloved, shall be alone for evermore . . . without her! . . . henceforward, alone, for evermore! . . . Oh, Hebe!"

A great, swift, wild joy filled my heart, my very soul itself, to overflowing. Instinctively I raised my eyes Heavenward, with a brief, mute prayer of deepest thanksgiving upon my lips. At last!—ah, yes, thank Heaven! I knew—I was sure of the truth at last!

The cool water from the fountain quickly revived Julian, and with eyes now wide open he recognised me bending over him.

"Hebe!—you! I—I thought you were elsewhere," he said, in a weary voice. "I hope I haven't frightened you! But—but you see, dear, I was resting here for a while upon the stone rim, and an unwanted sensation of vertigo overcame me quickly, and I remember nothing else. The day has been most oppressive, has it not?—and, to tell the truth, I have slept but ill for nights past. In fact, I have not felt altogether well—myself—of late," he muttered. "That must account for it, I suppose."

I assisted him to rise, and he sat leaning there against the fountain rim. Then I sped into the dining-room and got him some brandy; I insisted on his taking it when I returned to him; and he obeyed me—I kneeling solicitously by his side the while.

"Julian, are you better?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes, dear; you are very sweet and kind. And now—and now, I think, I'll go into the house. By the bye, Hebe, is it not time that you joined Aragon in the pleasure?" He will lose his patience else in waiting for you."

"He may lose it if he likes. I shall not go to him, Julian; at least"—amending the assertion—"I will go, perhaps, presently; but I shall then carry to him a very different answer from the one that I came out with the intention of giving him only a few minutes ago."

"Hebe!—what—what on earth is it that you mean!" Julian exclaimed almost passionately.

"This; and this only." And then I told him bravely, every word, all that I had heard him murmur touching myself, only a little while before, in his half unconscious state. "And that, of course, you know," I ended joyously, "has made all the difference in regard to my intended answer to Mr. Aragon."

A cry of torture broke from Julian then; he

shivered violently and covered his face with his hands.

"Oh, Hebe! my young beloved!" he groaned. "Reflect, my child, my little one, how much you are saying—how hardly and how cruelly you are tempting me! I am middle-aged—more than middle aged, some would persuade you—and in all respects miserably unlike my muscular fellow men. You cannot, you must not, so sacrifice yourself. The world would pity you—and condemn me. No, no, no! 'Tis better and far seemlier that you should go straightway to George Aragon and give him that answer which I know he is hoping to obtain from you. He is handsome, courteous, loyal—an honest gentleman, Hebe. Your future with him will be—"

"My future," I stopped him firmly, "will be spent with the man I love. And you, Julian, and only you, have I loved dearly and unchangedably ever since I was a child at Thorpe."

And I placed my hands upon his, and tried to remove them from before his bowed face, but I could not.

"Very well," I said, quietly, letting my head rest against his shoulder; "bid me, then, go at once to Mr. Aragon, and go to him I will this very instant. Send me away from you, Julian—do you hear? I will obey. Bid me go and leave you here. Say that word 'Go' if you can!"

Once more a strong shudder swept over his frame, gripping and rending him as it were from head to foot. Then his hands dropped heavily from before his face; and he cried out with a sort of passionate humanity.

"Heaven help me, Hebe—I cannot!"

* * * * *

A little later—

"And I always thought, do you know, Julian, that you disliked me so much; that you sometimes could not even bear the sight of me, in fact; because—because I reminded you too sorely of—of the sorrows, and the shadows and the secrets of the past!"

"Ah, no, my dearest! If I shunned you, and tried to be cold and indifferent to you, it was simply because I was aware that you were only too surely forcing me to forget the darkened past and its bitter trials. I did only what I believed was best and right. Who—what indeed was I that I should dare to dream, even in lightest moments, of ever linking my hermit, crippled life with that of a bright young soul like yours—"

"I will not listen to you, if you talk in that strain. I mean it, Julian!"

"Yes, my sweet, young love!"

"I have just thought of it. How the good old Squire Everard, my grandfather, would rejoice this night were he only alive with us now at Castlegrave, to know, to see what has actually come to pass in the end!"

"Dear one, let us hope and believe that he does see and know; and in Heaven, rejoicing greatly, blesses us there," Julian answered, with a rapt upward look at the pale, starry sky, where we ever love to persuade ourselves that our vanished dear ones dwell!

* * * * *

Yet a little later—

"Hebe, sweet!"

"Yes, my own Julian."

"Your finding me here insensible at eventide upon the grass plot by the fountain in the quadrangle, and with one sweet word restoring me to life, hope, and love, is forcibly suggestive, is it not, dear? of the ancient nursery legend of Beauty and the Beast."

"That is exactly what that ridiculous Felicia once said," I admitted ingenuously, with a low, happy little laugh. "She compared us, I mean, to Beauty and the Beast one day; and at the time, I remember, she made me dreadfully angry."

"'Twas like her gay, impudent wit, truly!" smiled Julian, sweet temperedly—"and Hebe!"

"Yes, Julian."

"I fear that you have forgotten Aragon."

I started, aghast.

"Absolutely," I confessed.

"Well, you had better go to him directly, my



"HERE . . . MY LOVE, MY DARLING . . . MY LITTLE LOST LOVE," MURMURED JULIAN TO HIMSELF.

darling," Julian advised. "We are treating him rather unfairly."

"You come with me, then—do Julian!" I coaxed, somehow smitten with sudden shyness.

"What?" he laughed, "on so delicate a mission? Hardly, I think. No, run along alone, and do your duty bravely, my sweet one, and I will wait here by the fountain just as patiently as I can until you return to my side."

I went reluctantly—half fearfully. Already were the clocks clanging out the second quarter after ten! But I never reached the pleasureance that night; for there, under the old decaying monastic archway, heavy and sombre with its faithful ivy-turberne, I met George Aragon himself, strolling leisurely from Dame Lucy's garden in search of me nearer home.

"Better late than never," cried he, holding out both hands in eager greeting. "I had positively given you up, do you know, and was on my way to hunt for you. I could stand the suspense no longer. Well," in a softer and more serious tone—"what is to be my fate? Is it 'Yes' or 'No'?"

Surely an awkward truth is at all times best told bluntly and plainly. And so I told it, in that fashion, to George Aragon—explaining everything and keeping back nothing, making all things clear.

"You are candid, at any rate," said he after a pause, in a rather strained hurt tone; but, as Bayard or Sir Egloamour like as ever, he offered me his arm to escort me back to the quadrangle.

Julian, discerning our approach, limped hurriedly forward to meet us; and looked searching up into the pale calm face of my tall rejected lover.

"Aragon, forgive me," he said gently, "if I have robbed you of something you count very dear. Yet, Aragon—after all, you must blame Habs; not me."

Without a second's hesitation George Aragon held out his hand. Without a second's hesitation Julian met the generous advance.

And thus the two men—outwardly at least so

singularly contrasted—shook hands, silently but significantly, on the spot.

I have now only to gather up the loose and scattered threads of my story, and to weave them, as it were, as neatly as I may into the whole narrative, and then my task will be done.

Felicia and Bertie were married quietly at Thorpe at the end of the summer; Bertie's gray-haired old father officiating proudly at the ceremony; Mr. Aragon, of course, giving away to his friend his newly-found daughter; and my own Julian, ever kind and generous of heart, providing a sumptuous wedding-feast for the pair at The Lea.

For the honeymoon Bertie and Felicia went a-touring in the caravan. Their leisurely journey on wheels, amid the romantic scenery of North Wales, was entirely the bride's own whim; she had frequently declared that, should she ever marry a man rich enough to humour her modest fancies, he should take her somewhere for the honeymoon in a gipsy-van!

George Aragon, R.A., the most popular painter of his day, has never married again. His life is a brilliant, yet withal perhaps a solitary one—his constant companion is the collie Presto.

But my humble and attached friend, Selina Anne, by the way, has lately taken unto herself an excellent mate—none other, indeed, than our stalwart young footman Willis; and both of them, though now man and wife, continue to serve us faithfully at Castlegrange.

We never speak of the past; Julian and I; why should we? It could do no good, and would onlyadden us.

The memory of it lives, however, in the heart of each of us—the tragic history of the lives of Doria and Doreen can never be forgotten so long as life shall last.

Mrs. Vasper—so we have lately heard—has returned to her old work in the hospitals. May the

poor afflicted souls under her care and ministrations appreciate duly her many virtues!

A part of every summer we spend at The Lea, where Prudence Best reigns autocratically all the year round. Thither, to join us, for a pastoral holiday, towards the end of July, come Bertie, Felicia, their children, and the children's singularly young-looking and handsome grandfather, George Aragon.

Bertie's second boy is called "George"; and already has the bright little fellow in the grace and mien of him something of the air, in miniature, of the distinguished painter.

Occasionally also we get Madame Adolphe at Lea Cottage—that is to say, when the multifarious demands upon the leisure of her busy life will admit of the hard-earned holiday.

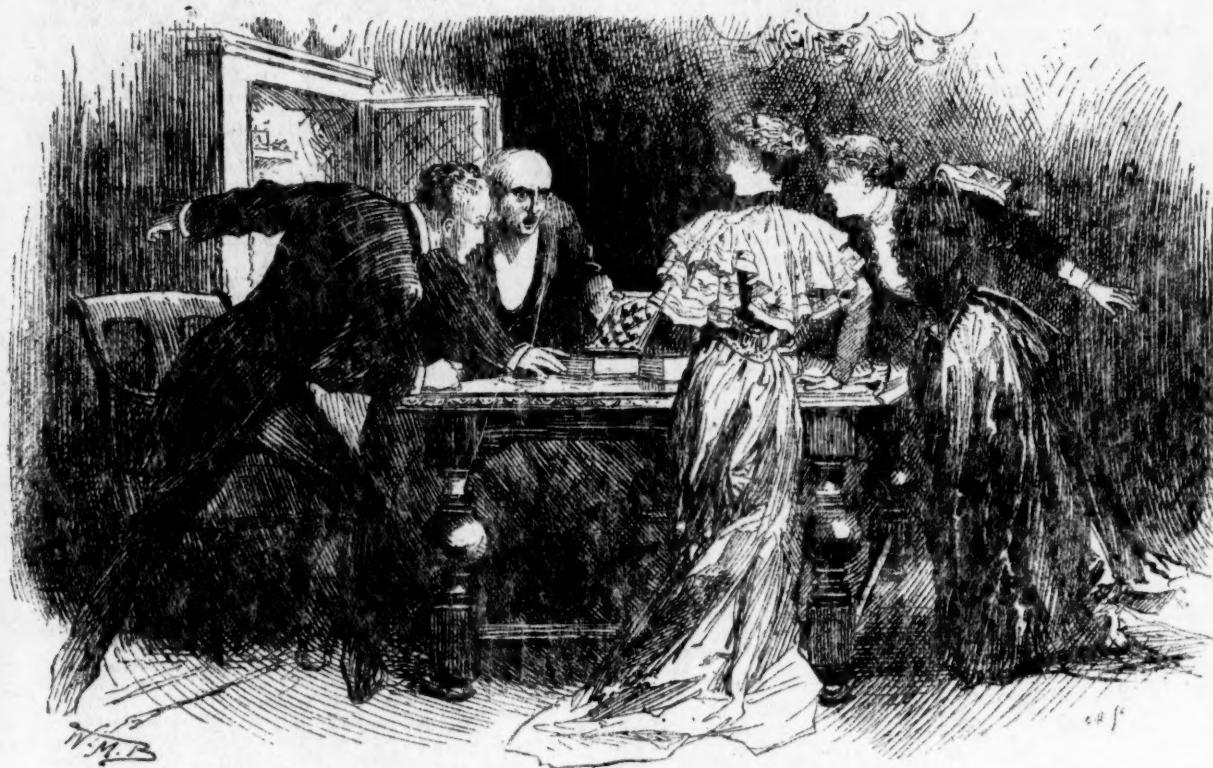
But The Lea is not like Castlegrange, where with ease we could lodge a whole regiment of cavalry; and so at Thorpe—where the children scamper delightedly, with Presto and the other dogs, over the breezy downs and level pasture-grounds fragrant with aftermath—we are obliged to find night-accommodation for some of these our annual and ever-welcome guests at "The Mariner's Rest" over the way.

And at Christmas, as surely as the glad season comes round, do we all meet again at Castlegrange—a happy group, forsooth, I think, without a real care in the world.

A year or so ago there was a christening in the chapel at Castlegrange; when Mrs. Joyce—who will end her days with us—George Aragon and Bertie Wilford, stood sponsors at the font to Julian Tressillian the younger.

(THE END.)

A WOMAN five feet in height should weigh about one hundred pounds; five feet one inch, about one hundred and six; five feet two inches, one hundred and thirteen; five feet three inches, one hundred and nineteen; five feet four inches, one hundred and thirty pounds.



OF THE FAMOUS TUDOR DIAMONDS NOT A TRACE REMAINED—TIARA, NECKLACE, BRACELETS AND PENDANTS—ALL HAD VANISHED!

TWO GIRLS.

—:o:—

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. MONTAOUR came downstairs while Owen was still wondering how he should broach the subject of the robbery to her.

She walked straight into the morning-room, and found her son standing on the hearthrug, staring with abstracted gaze at the mantelpiece, which had been simply swept of everything portable, nothing remaining but the quaint Princess lamps at either corner, which, besides being of an awkward shape to conceal, were of comparatively trifling value.

Mrs. Montague looked from the empty shelf to Owen, and from him back again to the place where, only yesterday, poor Mrs. Tudor's choicest nicknacks had been displayed. Then she said, coldly,—

"What does this mean? What practical joke are you playing me, Owen?"

Owen felt bewildered. Was her surprise genuine? Did she really know nothing of the robbery?

"I am not likely to joke, mother," he answered, sadly. "Poor Hawkins is almost beside himself. He says a hundred pounds would not cover the value of the things stolen."

"Stolen!" repeated Mrs. Montague. "Oh, I thought you had taken them away to dispose of. As you are so poor you cannot spare your mother a few pounds, you can hardly afford to keep Dresden china ornaments."

"Mother! Do you know nothing of the loss?"

"I? Do you mean to accuse me of robbing you? What next I wonder!"

"You know you said last night," he hesitated, "if I did not give you what you asked for you would take it."

"I am not answerable for what I said last night—I was tired and ill. You had annoyed me terribly. You always do."

He sighed.

"Who was it who came last evening and asked to see me?"

"I have not the remotest idea."

"Hawkins said you saw him."

"I did see him," admitted Mrs. Montague, "he would not go away without. Hawkins was standing close to this door, and must have heard every word I said. I told the man you were out, and I had no idea when you would be back. He went away then. I felt sorry for him. I expect he wanted to ask you for money. I am sure he had been in better circumstances once."

"But who was he?"

"My dear Owen, I have told you I cannot tell you. He may have been some stranger passing through the place, and hearing of your romantic accession to fortune, thought you would assist him. He looked desperately poor."

"He told Hawkins he was an old friend of ours."

"Knowing Hawkins could not tell if it were a falsehood. He said nothing of the kind to me. I am positive he only came to try and extort a little money. If you did not keep me without a shilling in my pocket I would have given him something myself."

"He seems to have fared well. The things he has taken will produce a good many shillings."

"He did not take them," said Mrs. Montague decidedly, "I must have seen them if he had; he was not carrying a sack or anything that could conceal them. I particularly noticed both his hands were empty—indeed, he waved them about just like a Frenchman."

Owen felt dumfounded.

"Then, where are the things?"

"I am quite sure he did not take them," said Mrs. Montague, gravely; "but I believe robbers were here last night."

"Mother!"

"You are so ready to find fault," she went on peevishly, "you never think anyone can do right except yourself. If you had heard what

told me out last night you would be sorry for the abuse you have poured on me."

"I never abused you, mother." Poor fellow, his heart was aching sorely. "Don't you think you could put your personal injuries and complaints aside for a few moments and try to help me find a clue to the mystery."

Mrs. Montague's face cleared.

She sat down on the sofa, and began her story, which was plausible enough, only that, alas, Owen Tudor knew perfectly she would not scruple to tell untruths if it served her purpose.

It seemed Mrs. Montague, after she had retired to her own room, felt too wakeful to go to bed, and sat up over the fire with a novel.

At half-past ten she heard, as she thought, the sound of voices, and went downstairs.

Thinking Owen and his sister had returned, and meaning to hear all about their evening, she went into the library, and to her surprise found the shutters unfastened and the window opened—in fact, the room was just in the same state as when Owen returned an hour later.

Instead of ringing for Hawkins, Mrs. Montague rushed out of the library through the French windows into the grounds. She was so frightened she hardly knew what she was about, and before she could recollect anything she fainted.

When she came to herself she was so cold and terrified she could only manage to crawl back to the house, and entered the library only to meet Owen's stern accusing eyes, and to sink into a second swoon at his feet.

"But why didn't you tell me?" demanded poor Owen almost beside himself. "I daresay I seemed hard and unfeeling but I couldn't possibly guess what had happened."

"I was half dazed," replied his mother; "even now I can't remember clearly what you said. I know I asked you for money and you refused it, it was only when I woke up this morning I remembered I had never found out how the library windows came to be open, or if any one had broken into the house."

"I had better speak to Hawkins," said Owen,

still with the uneasy feeling there was something he could not fathom.

But the testimony of the butler and that of Mrs. Montague contradicted each other; Hawkins declared that no earthly power could open the library shutters or windows *from outside*, and that if the thief had gone out that way, he must have come in some other.

The old man admitted that he was at supper from nine till ten, but declared after that he was at his post in the hall and no one could have made the slightest noise in the library without his knowledge.

"I'm thinking, sir, if the thief made off that way he must have got in earlier in the day and hidden himself in the library as soon as it was shut up for the night; when you are out yourself, sir, it's a wonder if anyone goes into that room after dark. But I still hold to it, sir, the man whom Mrs. Montague saw was the thief, and he stripped the mantelpiece and writing table while he was waiting for her."

"He had no bag," persisted Mrs. Montague, "and both his hands were empty."

"He'd pockets, may be, ma'am; he was wearing a great coat."

"The clock would not go into a man's pocket," said Mrs. Montague, losing her temper as she always did when people differed from her, "besides if the robbery was committed between six and seven, why did I find the library windows open at nearly eleven o'clock?"

Hawkins looked bewildered, this last question was a poser for him.

"I've lived here over thirty years and such a thing never happened before," he said gloomily. "You'd better send me away, sir, I must be getting past my work."

"I'm not likely to do that," said Owen kindly. "I don't see that you are at all to blame, Hawkins; and now I am going over to Thornton, to see the police, and I really think you had better come with me, you can tell the inspector far more than I can."

"I should feel much safer if Hawkins stayed here to protect the house," said Mrs. Montague.

"No harm will happen in broad daylight," said Owen, "and I shall tell James not to leave the Hall."

It was the butler's suggestion that they should drive first to the two lodges and see if the stranger had passed through the gates after his call at Diamond End.

"It was dark, sir, but women have wonderfully sharp eyes, and strangers are so rare in these parts I expect they'd notice him."

Mrs. King, at the South Lodge, quite justified Hawkins's encomiums.

"The gentleman came through about five, sir. I noticed him because I thought he walked a bit lame, and our dog flew out at him and tried to bite him; he was a tall, fine-looking man, and his clothes, somehow, didn't seem good enough for him."

"And did you notice what time he came back?"

"He never came back this way, sir, . . . it was moonlight and frosty, so that we could hear any creature that went by, and there was no one after you passed through in the carriage, sir, till we went to bed at ten."

Always courteous, Owen thanked her, and turned his horse in the direction of the second lodge, he was driving himself for he did not want any of the household to know of his visit to the police.

"It wouldn't take anyone two mortal hours to walk from the lodge to the house, sir," said Hawkins, acutely, "unless they were after something *wrong* and had to hide themselves."

The second lodge was kept by the coachman's wife and children, and here all knowledge of the stranger was denied. Mrs. Smith had locked the gates at six, as was her custom in winter when there was no party at the house. No one had rung the bell afterwards, and so no one could have gone through.

"I don't like it," said Owen gravely to the butler, as they drove on; "it looks as if the man had loitered about and got into the house again later."

"We'd better call at the railway station, sir,"

said Hawkins. "If he took those things depend upon it he's off by now."

The one official at Chilton listened to their questions with a stolid face.

"There was only one passenger by the first train this morning," he said, "and he had a game leg."

"A what?" asked Owen, not understanding.

"A game leg, sir. He'd torn his trousers from the knee most to the bottom, and scratched himself badly besides; he said he'd done it climbing over walls but it looked more like as if he'd been trespassing and clambering over some railings. He asked me to lend him a needle and thread. The missus was just up and she caught it together for him and he gave her a shilling."

"What was he like?"

"Tall and stylish looking," said the porter, "but his clothes were rare and shabby, and I don't think they were ever made in England. They were thinner than people wear here, and the trousers were light."

"Light grey cloth," put in the butler, with a black line on them."

"That's the man," said the porter. "He'd got a black bag with him, but I don't think there could have been much in it, for I put it into the train, and it felt pretty light."

"Where did he take his ticket for?"

"Didn't take no ticket, sir. He'd a third-class return half to King's-cross."

"And you'd know him again?"

"Anywhere, sir," replied the porter. "He was down on his luck, but he'd been a gentleman once. I hope he ain't wanted for anything."

"He's just taken whatever he could lay hands on," groaned Hawkins. "There, sir, I don't believe we'll ever see one of those things again."

Inspector Tarbert did not give them much hope. He seemed to think they had been insane, first, not to discover the robbery sooner; second, not to come to him at once.

"The Parliamentary would get to London by one," he said dejectedly, "and it's that now, so it's no use to telegraph to have the man stopped, not that he'd be such a fool as to stay in it, he'd change into the express at the junction."

"And you can do nothing?"

"I'm afraid not. I'll telegraph his description to the London authorities, and send them a list of the valuables. If he disposes of them in London we can drop on him."

"It is not the value of the property so much," said Mr. Tudor, "as the sense of insecurity. I never heard of such a barefaced robbery. The man sent in a message he was an old friend of mine."

"Knowing you were from home. That's a very old dodge, sir. You see at this time of year these gentrified usually infest country houses. There's always the chance they'll be left alone for a few moments, and in mansions like yours there is generally some portable valuable they can pick up. I've known the trick played just for the value of a great coat and an umbrella."

The inspector took down Hawkins's description of the man, also the porter's story.

"If he's really lame that might be a clue, but the chances are that his clothes were more injured than himself. Well, Mr. Tudor, we'll do our best, but I ought to warn you there's very little hope of your getting your property back."

They were so near Copley that Owen decided to drive on and see Sir John. He was very partial to the baronet and Lady Blake. As yet he had not met their sons. The eldest was in London. Duke had gone abroad for a lengthened stay, self-exiled, everyone in the neighbourhood believed, because he could not get over poor Gladys Keith's loss.

"That's right, Tudor, delighted to see you," was Sir John's greeting. "Have you promoted old Hawkins to be your groom. I thought I saw him at your side as you drove up."

"He's been with me about some rather disagreeable business, sir," said Owen. "I want to consult you over a difficulty, and so I ventured to hope you'd give me some lunch."

"Come along," cried Sir John. "My wife's

in bed with a bad cold, so you'll save me from a lonely meal."

He would not hear the "disagreeable business" till lunch was over, then he took Owen into his own den and said, kindly,—

"Now, tell me whatever you like; I shall be only too glad to help you for your uncle's sake and your own."

But Sir John looked very grave when he heard the story.

"If I were you, Tudor, I'd insist on having a constable to watch the grounds for a few nights; depend upon it this light-fingered gentleman was only a kind of advance guard. There's some design upon your property, and he came first to spy out the land."

"Hawkins says he was only in the house five minutes."

"I expect he was there over three hours. You may depend upon it when Hawkins had let him out he found some other means of entrance, crept quietly round to the library while the family were at dinner, and made a mental plan of the whole ground floor. 'Have you missed no money?'"

"I never keep money in the house beyond a small amount in my purse."

"What fellow! And the ladies—their jewellery!"

"Is safe, for the best of all reasons, my mother and sisters don't possess any."

"But your aunt's—the Tudor family jewels. Surely you have those in your keeping?"

"Hawkins has them safe in a chest in the strong room where he keeps the plate, and I would trust him with untold gold."

"So would I. But don't your sisters wear any of the jewels?"

"I don't think they even know of their existence. My mother, the young man flushed, painfully, "is already disposed to think it hard she is not the owner of Diamond End; if I told her about the jewels she would at once claim them."

"Well, you must bring home a wife to do justice to them. Seriously, Tudor, the jewels are a sight worth looking at. Your great uncle was intensely proud of them; he meant to make them over to poor Gladys on her marriage."

"I have never seen them."

"Never seen them! My dear fellow are you an anchorite? Are you sworn to take no interest in pretty things?"

"I have given you one reason, sir; I had another. I never think of Gladys Keith without a sense of guilt that I should be even the innocent cause of her sorrows and early death. I don't think I could bear to see anyone I cared for wear the jewels that were meant for her; it would seem to me as though some trouble would fall on them."

"That's superstition. Come, Tudor, you are expecting your eldest sister soon, aren't you? Take my advice, have a family exhibition of the jewels when she comes, and then send them to the bank for safe keeping. After what you've just told me, it doesn't seem very wise to keep so many valuables at home."

"Doris will be here on Friday, and I will take your advice."

"She comes next you in age, doesn't she?"

"Yes, but there are some years between us; she is a Montague, you know. I am the only Tudor of us all."

"I wish your uncle had known you," said Sir John, regretfully, "I think he would have confessed you were a worthy owner for the old place."

"I have grown to love it dearly," said Owen, gravely; "but the memory of that poor girl seems to haunt it still."

"Aye, I have that feeling strongly myself. I met Anstruther, yesterday; he tells me he has a young lady staying with him who might be Gladys Keith come back to life."

"I am no judge. I have never even seen her photograph."

"Nor I," said Sir John. "The fact is there wasn't such a thing; she was never away from her uncle and aunt, so they didn't need a likeness of her, and she had absolutely no girl friends. It was a lonely life for her, but I never saw a creature so full of gladness."

"Everyone seems to say she was charming," said Owen. "I don't wonder your son finds it hard to forget her."

"Duke will never forget her," said the father, simply; "he is one of those quiet, steadfast natures that never change. You see his love for Gladys had grown with his youth and strengthened with his strength; but the strangest thing is, Duke is the only creature who won't believe she is dead."

"What does he think then?" asked Owen with great interest.

"He believes she is alive somewhere. He does not get as far as saying where. His theory is that she was too good and brave to take her own life unless she were out of her mind, and that if her brain stood the treble shock of bereavement, poverty, and Douglas's perfidy, it would not give way under any bodily discomforts."

"But I understood Mr. Vesey she left his house suddenly without a word of warning."

"She did. But Duke has a very bad opinion of poor Vesey's wife. I never saw her myself, but it is rumoured they are an unhappy couple. Mrs. Vesey may have made Gladys feel herself unwelcome. In a hundred ways she may have wounded the girl."

"What does Mr. Blake advise?"

"Duke! He thinks no detectives will be of any use. He believes that some day, when Gladys is earning her own living independently, she will write to her old friends. He says she is sure to turn to us someday, if only we wait patiently."

"But, if she is ill or suffering hardships, she might die alone and uncared for."

Sir John sighed.

"My own romance went quite smoothly. I fell in love with my wife and married her. I can't quite understand Duke, but I know that, quiet as he is, and little as he says of his feelings, his whole heart was bound up in Gladys, and, as he loved her best, so, perhaps, Mr. Tudor, he would understand her best."

CHAPTER XVI.

DORIS MONTAGUE would gladly have postponed her journey to Northshire until her lover could accompany her, but business prevented Ashley's leaving London before Christmas Eve, and as her sisters were most anxious Doris should be at the Arnlane's *fête* at that festival she gave in with a good grace, and even invested some of her modest savings in an evening dress for the event so as not to discredit to her family.

Helen Duncan, who was supposed to be an authority in dress, came over to see and advise, and finally assured Doris she would look charming enough to take all Northshire by storm.

"Only I don't want to," was the blushing answer.

"Ah, I forgot you were 'bespoke.' Doris, don't you ever feel tired of being engaged to a poor man?"

The question was put so naively as to take all sting from the words.

Doris laughed.

"No; but then you see I am quite used to poverty. Now, you, Nellie, would feel very strange if you were to go in for love in a cottage."

Helen sighed.

"I don't think I shall ever care for anyone, Doris," she said, rather disconsolately.

"Time enough, yet," replied the elder girl. "Helen, do you know that Miss Nairn you were so taken with is staying at Northshire. She's been down there professionally, but returns tomorrow, so I shall just miss seeing her."

"You mean the elder one, not my Miss Nairn, she's very nice, but not like Gladys. I quite lost my heart to her. I wanted to make a great friend of her but mother won't let me. She says though the Nairns are ladies they are in a very inviolable position."

Doris smiled.

"Miss Nairn seems a great favourite in Northshire, my sister Arline raves about her."

"Doris, don't you think you might ask me to tea?" asked Nell, demurely. "I'll promise to be awfully good and never say anything to shock the Misses Turle, and you know you are going away to-morrow for a whole month."

The invitation was given readily. Doris knew the Misses Turle would welcome Helen, and she was out so often she had not scruples about the cost to them of her friend's cup of tea.

But while the two girls sat over the drawing-room fire talking, as only girls can, there came a thundering knock at the front door, and Helen, who was the essence of mischief, peeped out of the venetian blinds and told Doris the visitor was a gentleman.

"I thought the Misses Turle did not approve of men, and had no masculine visitors except Mr. Croft and the curate!"

"I daresay it's the tax-collector," said Doris placidly. "Whenever an extra grand knock came at home it was always the tax-collector or the water-rate man."

Helen shook her head.

"I don't believe it is this time. Do let the stranger come in here."

"I don't expect he will come in at all; even if it's a visitor, all the Misses Turle are out. They won't be home till tea-time—more than half an hour."

Enter the small servant.

"It's a gentleman to see you, Miss Montague; he wouldn't give his name, but he said his business was most particular."

Doris looked terrified.

"Something must have happened to Ashley."

"Nonsense," said the more practical Helen; "they'd telegraph if Mr. Croft had had an accident; it would be much cheaper than sending a special messenger. Show the gentleman in, Ruth," then, in a lower tone to her friend, "I will stay and protect you, dear."

There entered a handsome, middle-aged man, dressed quietly but fashionably, and with an indescribable air of prosperity about him, he bowed as he came in and looked searchingly at the two girls before he said to Doris,—

"Miss Montague, I think?"

She bowed, and Helen struck in, cheerfully,—

"Miss Montague is so unused to strangers she thinks you must necessarily have brought her bad news."

"By no means," the gentleman smiled benevolently; "I am lately returned from Northshire, and, hearing you were going there to-morrow, I have called to ask you kindly to take charge of a packet I am anxious to send to your brother. It is of a most private nature, and I would prefer not to trust it to the post."

"He wants to save the postage," decided Miss Duncan, privately. "Well, he must be mean; you can register quite a big parcel for eight-pence."

Doris agreed, but she was manifestly ill at ease. The stranger sat down and talked glibly of many subjects; told her he was an old friend of the family, and remembered her a little girl. It had been a great pleasure to him to find her brother settled at Diamond End.

"Did you see my brother?" asked Doris, wondering Ethel had not mentioned this benevolent old friend in her last letter.

"I was not so fortunate; all the young people were out, but I had a pleasant talk with Mrs. Montague over old times."

How her mother must have altered I thought Doris; she used to hate talking of the past.

When the stranger had said a few more platitudes, he produced the packet, which appeared to be a cardboard box about six inches square, neatly wrapped in brown paper; it was addressed to "Owen Tudor, Esq., Diamond End." And the visitor took great pains to assure Doris its contents were not breakable.

He was gone, but somehow the girls could not resume the cosy chat he had disturbed. Doris crouched over the fire as though smitten by a sudden chill; and Nell, after watching her a few seconds in troubled silence, broke out impetuously with,—

"I don't like that man, Doris; there is something uncanny about him."

Doris answered and replied,—

"I wish he had not come. I can't put it into words, Nell, but I seem to feel trouble will fall on us through him."

She expected Helen to laugh at her words. Generally Miss Duncan was far too prosaic and commonplace to believe in presentiments, but to-day she looked unusually grave and answered,—

"I wish we had not seen him."

"Why? Did you think—"

"Don't go and put yourself into an agony, Doris, or I won't say a word. Keep quiet and listen to me; that man was an impostor."

"But he said he knew us. He mentioned the girls by their Christian names. He had seen mother."

"He wore a wig," said Helen, gravely. As he took up his hat he must have touched it accidentally, and put it on one side. I could see the hair underneath distinctly, and it was dark-brown sprinkled with silver."

The stranger's snowy hair and beard had been his most remarkable feature. Doris felt suddenly Helen was right. The man's face, above all, his dark, flashing eyes seemed too young to accord with that particular hair; it must have been the contrast which struck her so strangely.

She looked at the box in a strange, scared way.

"What do you think is in it?"

"A begging letter of some kind," answered Nell. "Perhaps he has tried every other way of appealing to Mr. Tudor's feelings, and now takes this strange method of forcing himself on his notice. Don't look so terrified, Doris; the box can't bite you!"

"You don't think there is anything in it that would—explode."

Helen's hearty laugh was most reassuring.

"You dear old goose, only Fenians and Socialistic strikers send infernal machines, and I'm quite sure Mr. Tudor hasn't offended either. It won't be anything worse than a begging letter, Doris."

The Misses Turle came in, and tea was announced, but though Doris sat at the table she could not force herself to swallow a morsel.

Helen had to talk for the two of them to prevent the kind old maids wondering what was amiss, but very soon after tea she had to go home.

"Tell Mr. Croft," was her parting exhortation, "and don't fret, Doris, it can't be anything worse than a begging letter."

Ashley came in about seven, and his fiancee poured out her trouble; but she was alarmed to see he looked at the matter far more gravely than Helen Duncan.

"I am afraid I have been mistaken," he said, sadly, "but I kept silence to save you anxiety, Doris;" and then he told her of Charles Peyton's strange discovery about the stranger, who had not long ago feigned to be Betsy's father.

"I can't tell you his object, dear. I can't tell you who he is, but I am terribly afraid that man and your visitor are the same."

"But that man was a tramp—the one who came to-day was dressed like a gentleman, and, not only that but everything he had on matched. He couldn't have bought such a suit as that second-hand at an old clothes shop."

"I wish with all my heart I could go down with you to-morrow," said Ashley, "there is only one thing to be done, you must tell Owen everything at once. I shall write a full account of all I know, and post it to-morrow, he will get my letter on Saturday, when you have prepared him."

"And the packet—Ashley can't I open it?"

"No," said Mr. Croft, gravely, "better not; carry it in a hand-bag so that you can get at it without difficulty in case of need. If Owen meets you I should speak to him at once, if not you had better wait till you are alone with him. I wouldn't scare the girls or—your mother."

Doris reached Chilton about three o'clock, and found her two sisters on the platform, and they greeted her with such delight that she reproached herself for having been sorry to see their bright faces instead of Owen's.

"Mother's lying down with a headache," said Arline, when she had received her eldest sister's tender congratulation. "Doris, I don't think

she's a bit stronger than she was at Camberwell. She's always having those headaches."

"And how is Owen?" asked Doris, as they drove rapidly on, and she enjoyed the luxury of the brougham, to which the younger girls were now quite used.

"Owen is worried to death. We don't talk about it, because he told us not. He was angry, indeed, with poor old Hawkins for letting us know, but there's been a robbery at Diamond End. On Tuesday night, while Arline and Owen were dining at the Anstruthers, some man got in. He told Hawkins something about being a friend of the family, and so he was left alone in the morning-room, and he stripped it of every ornament he could carry."

"Mother's very angry about it," put in Arline, "she says she saw that man leave the house, and she knows he took nothing. She thinks someone got in later."

Doris kept back her own confidence by an effort.

"It seems funny to think of our being grand enough to tempt robbers," she said with a smile, "if the man was a friend, I expect mamma is right."

"But he wasn't, he got off to London by the Parliamentary on Wednesday morning, and the porter says he was carrying a black bag, and had torn his trousers in getting over some gate. Owen believes he concealed himself in the grounds and then climbed over the railings, the gates are locked at night."

Doris felt as if her heart was standing still. This man was known to have left Chilton on Wednesday. Her unwelcome visitor arrived on Thursday afternoon, which would have given him twenty-four hours in London; ample time, supposing he had money, for him to effect any change in his appearance or attire.

Mrs. Montague was well enough to appear at afternoon tea. She greeted Doris affectionately, and seemed pleased to see her, though she asked, sarcastically, if Arline's brilliant prospects had not made her ashamed of her folly.

"Not a bit; but I'm longing to see Cecil Anstruther, and I've bought a dress which Helen Duncan calls 'a work of art' for the ball."

When Owen came in he looked so careworn that Doris thought prosperity did not agree with him.

"I have missed you so, dear," she said, thankful to have her hand safe in his clasp once more.

"And I you," he answered. "Doris, if you are not tired to death I want you to sit up an hour after the girls have gone to bed and talk to me. I'm in a desperate muddle, and I think your clear head can help me."

"I'm not a bit tired, Owen, and I've a great deal I want to say to you."

"Come to me in the library then, dear, as soon after tea as you can get away. My mother has taken a hatred for the room, and the girls won't mind our giving them a hint we want to talk confidence as they come after you."

This was their only chance of a word apart before dinner. Doris felt she must defer her strange story till she got her brother to herself; but the "packet" in her travelling bag weighed heavily on her mind, and quite prevented her enjoying the sight of Owen at his own dinner-table, waited on by old Hawkins and a tall liveried footman. Mr. Tudor soon joined the ladies in the drawing-room.

"I have a proposal to make," he said, cheerfully, "that now Doris is here we all have a family inspection of my aunt's jewels. I have never looked at them since since I came because they seemed to me so connected with poor Gladys Keith that I had a superstitious feeling they would only bring us evil. Sir John Blake laughs at me, however, and says I am ridiculous. It seems, too, that most of these jewels came into the family before Gladys was born, and as she never wore them, can have no associations with her. I should like to give each of you girls a 'remembrance' of our sudden rush into prosperity so I have told Hawkins to have a large fire lighted in the strong-room, and I propose that we adjourn there at once."

"Always your sister," said Mrs. Montague, fretfully, "never your mother. If your poor

father had lived all these jewels would have been mine."

"I never thought of slighting you, mother," was Owen's answer. "I thought as you were not going to the ball on Monday there was no special need for you to choose a present to-night, and as you have been ailing all day I did not suppose you would care to come to a room that does not possess one comfortable chair."

"Oh! go your own way," said Mrs. Montague, bitterly, "you none of you have any respect or love for your mother."

They left her to her temper. Long experience had taught them it was useless to attempt to argue with Mrs. Montague when she had "feelings," so the brother and sisters filed off to the strong room, where old Hawkins stood hovering round like the high priest of some mystic heathen temple.

"Mr. Vesey opened the safe after my mistress's funeral, sir, to put back all the jewels she had in use. You'll see a suite of pearls that Miss Gladys wore at her first ball, that are said to be wonderfully fine, and the Tudor diamonds—they're in an inner safe by themselves—are worth fifty thousand pounds. Mr. Vesey took the key of the safe away with him, and said he'd give it into your hands, sir. I was thankful not to have the responsibility of it."

Owen produced the key, and opened the safe, which inside was fitted up to resemble a large jewel case.

The velvet-lined inner door swang back to disclose six velvet-covered shelves on which sparkled and gleamed jewels which Owen confessed looked fit for a king's ransom. The girls exclaimed in delight; but Hawkins shook his head slightly.

"They are well enough ladies; but the pearls and diamonds are the thing. You just unlock that door at the back, sir, and you come to the inner safe, and you'll find them in their cases. Ah! I shall never forget the last time I saw my mistress in those diamonds."

"You will not see them worn again just yet," said Owen. "Sir John advises me to send all these jewels to the Bank for the present. He thinks after what happened on Tuesday night it is only a needless precaution."

"No thieves could fathom the secret of that safe, sir. It's a special lock made to order, and the door of this room itself has a patent safety lock, and as I sleep with the key under my pillow, I don't think there's much chance of the jewels being lost."

Carefully removing the shelves Owen laid them side by side on the table, while he gave the second key to Hawkins to unlock the inner safe. The old man took out some half-dozen cases and placed them on the table.

"These are the diamonds, sir. The pearls are in those other cases further back."

"May I?" asked Doris, bending over the dull leather cases which concealed so much beauty; and at a nod from her brother she touched the spring, her sisters hanging about her to behold the diamonds.

A short cry from Doris, a bitter exclamation from Hawkins, and Owen turned from the hearth where he had been poking the fire. The case was empty. In breathless silence they opened the remaining cases. The result was the same. Of the famous Tudor diamonds not a trace remained—tiara, necklace, bracelets, and pendants—all had vanished.

(To be continued.)

THE greatest cities of ancient times were Babylon and Rome. The former is said to have had an area of 100 to 200 square miles; its houses were three or four stories high, but palaces and gardens occupied much of the vast area, so that the population was not what these figures would seem to indicate. In fact, it is said by one historian that ninetieths of this area was taken up by gardens and orchards. The total population of the city under Nebuchadnezzar and his son, Evil-Merodach, is estimated at over 2,000,000. Rome reached its greatest size during the fourth century of our era, and its population was then about 2,500,000.

LADY RAVENHILL'S SECRET.

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CHAPTER VIII.

"I SEE Ravenhill's yacht is at Cowes," said Captain Fortescue one morning at the breakfast table, laying down a paper, and once more attacking the ham in front of him with great vigour.

"What is that to you? You don't know him, do you?" said his sister, helping herself to fresh strawberry jam, with perfect composure.

"Don't know him!—the mustard, please—I should just rather imagine that I did!" contemptuously. "Why we were up in the Terai shooting with the same party for two months. There's no better way of getting to know a fellow than that."

"And how did you like him?" continued his sister inquisitively.

"Very much—a rattling good fellow—and very popular with the whole camp. He and his chum, Captain Coppering, came out for six months of the cold weather to see if they could get a good bag. Ravenhill was a very keen sportsman, but the other was a coffee-housing beggar."

"Pray what is that?" asked his sister, with raised eyebrows.

"Oh, a sort of chap that hates to walk far, or dirty his hands, or carry a heavy rifle—would like to dress for dinner every night in the jungle if he could, and go to the opera afterwards!"

"And the other?" said Mrs. Hill, now speaking for the first time; "your friend, Lord Ravenhill?"

"Oh, he went in for everything, hand over hand—worked like half-a-dozen coolies. He was a splendid shot, and as keen as could be, and had little leisure or inclination to be fastidious. He was worth ten of his pal, and did not care a brass button for danger or hardship. He asked me to look him up at his London club, and I will, and have a jaw over our joint experience. We were nearly nailed by a tiger once."

"How was that?" said his sister. "I wonder what pleasure or amusement there can be in tiger-shooting. Don't you, mother?"—turning to her parent, with down-drawn lips.

"At any rate, there's lots of excitement about it; and that's the main thing everybody is running after now," returned her brother, coolly.

"And in this particular instance, was there an ample supply?"

"Ample! I should think so! Ravenhill and I were up in the same tree, waiting whilst the coolies beat out a tiger with tom-toms and fireworks. We had been sitting up there for a couple of hours, and were getting pretty stiff; for you must not move, nor speak, nor sneeze, nor smoke, and hardly breathe, in case the tiger would twig you. So, as I before mentioned, we were getting pretty sick of it, and the shouts had died away in another direction, and the tom-toms too, and we thought our side of the jungle had been drawn blank, and we might as well go down—and down we went, Ravenhill first and I close behind him. We had scarcely touched the ground when we heard faint crackling of leaves and twigs close by; and there, within about three yards of Ravenhill, stood an enormous tiger. He could have touched him with the butt end of his rifle. I'll never forget the size of the brute, nor the glare in his yellow eyes, whilst he was making up his mind which of us he would have first. Ravenhill, in one second, fired both barrels right into his head; an instant's delay would have been fatal. The brute was as much taken aback by our sudden appearance as we were by his, and Ravenhill recovered his presence of mind first, and that just saved us. But it was an uncommonly near thing—too near to be pleasant."

"Well, at any rate, it was sufficiently exciting," said his sister. "Your friend must have pretty good nerves."

"Nerves! I should think so—nerves of iron!"

"And what is he like?" said Mrs. Hill, playing with her teaspoon negligently.

"Do you mean in appearance, or disposition, or what?"

"Oh! both, of course!" exclaimed his sister. "Tell us all about this tiger-killer of yours. Is he good looking, or ugly, big or little?"

"Rather tall, rather good-looking, dark; and as to disposition—he is a cheery fellow, liberal with his money, not given to gambling, not cursed with what is commonly called a temper; can be a bit disagreeable and sarcastic if he is riled, and takes his own way through thick and thin."

"Married?" asked his sister, with her head on one side.

"Oh! married, no; does not go in for ladies much. Perhaps you think he would suit you better than Richards, if you had only known him before—oh? You seem very interested in him, Molly—suspiciously interested. How is that?"

"Mere idle curiosity."

"Only mere idle curiosity! Come, I believe you have had some object in pumping me—out with it."

"Well, since you must know, I heard him spoken of by a friend of mine who knows him."

"A friend! What friend?"

"A lady friend."

"Your mysterious lady friend will take my advice. She won't lose her time talking or thinking of Ravenhill, for I've heard him say he wished every woman at the bottom of the Dead Sea!"

"Polite, certainly! If he was there himself I daresay society could spare him"—rising suddenly, and pushing back her chair—"this wild beast shooting does not need men's manners, does it, Nellie?"

"No," assented Nellie, "more especially if they have none to mend. Come, it is a lovely morning, the tide is full in; let us go down on the Parade, and look at the bathing."

Exit the two ladies arm-in-arm.

* * * * *

Although it is a day in mid August, and fine and shiny, there is a high wind getting up—as it does sometimes quite suddenly in this part of the world.

The bathing machines are not down—the boats are drawn up—and high white horses are beginning to show their crests, although but half-an-hour ago it was a very tolerable morning.

Down at the very end of the Parade, where a small jetty runs into the water, and where at low-water a number of sharp black rocks show their heads, and underneath the high-towering white cliffs there is assembled a large and excited crowd of sailors, soldiers, fishwives, fashionable loungers, visitors, and residents.

By their gestures and attitudes it is easy to perceive that they are looking at something in the sea—about sixty yards away. Two men drowning!

"What is the matter?" said a pursy, red-faced old gentleman, pushing and elbowing his way well to the front, with a telescope under his arm.

"Two poor soldiers," returned a young lady, with pallid cheeks, and widely dilated eyes. "There they are, out there—two of the Fusiliers—they were bathing, they swam out, and they can't get in again!"

"Bathing such a day! Madness—idiotic madness!" he cried, putting his eye suddenly to the glass.

"It was not nearly so bad when they went out, and now the wind is rising every minute, and every minute is of consequence. Oh! will no one put out a boat!" clasping her hands. "Are we to stand here and see them drown before our eyes? Oh, sir!" to the old gentleman, "you look like a sailor; could you not prevail on some of these men?" pointing to twenty or thirty boatmen, who were standing in a solid mass, but not moving one individual finger. "Could you not beg and implore them to put out a boat?"

"Put out a boat, indeed!" shouted a tall, able-looking fishwoman, with her arms akimbo. "What boat would live in that sea, but be smashed in the shingle ere she was launched? Our sailors' lives are every bit as much to us as those good-for-nothing red-coats!"

"Your sailors are cowards!" said the girl, fiercely. "If I were a man—if I had strong arms—I would go out myself—that I would. Standing here doing nothing is murder—that it is!" with flaming cheeks.

"Talking is easy," said the fishwoman, shrugging her shoulders with indescribable insolence.

"Where's the lifeboat?" demanded the old salt with the glass.

"The men are away at a funeral—the boat-house is locked," replied half-a-dozen voices simultaneously.

At this moment a soldier who had been in the water, but not been carried out so far, and with almost superhuman exertions had got to shore, now joined the group in his shirt and trousers, in a state of the most extraordinary excitement and despair.

"Will none of you put out a boat?" he demanded. "Will you see them go down before your eyes? I'll go on my bare knees to anyone that will lend a boat and pull an oar with me;" and looked eagerly round, but there was no reply in the weather-beaten stolid countenances that surrounded him.

"No boat could live," said one man at last. "If they kept well out to sea they might be picked up by a steamer or a yacht."

"Kept out to sea? They have been in the water the best part of an hour! They can't hold out any longer. Oh, will nobody save them?" said the soldier in despair, looking helplessly round, and at last bursting into loud sobs and tears.

"No; no one will save them! There is not a man here!" said the tall girl, furiously, glancing round with rage and scorn in her eyes, and then she, like the soldier, broke down too, and burst into a passion of weeping.

"I'll go out," said a tall, broad-shouldered young man, who had just joined the group in time to hear this last speech, now elbowing his way to the front. "Any volunteers?" he cried, raising his voice.

No answer beyond the whistling, soughing wind and lashing, grey-green waves.

"Fifty pounds—fifty pounds for a seaman and a strong boat!"

This time there was a murmur, a move in the crowd, and a long-armed, powerful looking man in a blue-knit jersey came slowly out from the group of sailors, and said,—

"I'm your man, sir, for fifty sovereigns."

"It's the price of your life, Jim Price," said the big fishwife, garrulously. "You'll be food for the fishes," consoling.

"Well, 'taint a bad price; many a man has risked it for less, and the young gentleman is venturing his for nothing."

The fishwife was here understood to say that the young gentleman was a fool, but at any rate he was not a man to let the grass grow under his feet.

"Here, then, hold your jaw," he cried, taking off his coat and throwing it into the girl's astonished hands. "Come, some of you fair-weather sailors, and lend us a hand to shove her off—you're not afraid of that, are you?"

"Hugh, Hugh!" said an angry, querulous voice, "are you mad? What the mischief are you about? You are not going out in that sea!" and a thin sandy little man joined him.

"I am, and that's all about it," returned Hugh, roughly. "Come, paws off, Pompey, and let me go!"

In another second he was up to his waist in water, shoving with might and main, and in two minutes he and his adventurous companion were afloat.

Afloat! but it was awful to see them, now on the top of a wave, in imminent danger of being dashed back on the shore; now lost in a hollow, every eye strained to see them, every breath held.

"There they are again!" cried half-a-dozen much-relieved voices.

But it was a hard struggle, a life and death struggle, in the very teeth of the wind. Well for it for those two men that their arms were as stout as their hearts.

They bent to their oars, and strained every muscle, and conquered, after a hard-fought battle one wave after another.

"They are over the worst now," said the old sea captain, with a sigh of intense satisfaction. "It was the getting off that was so bad; the waves are nothing like so big further out. That's a fine young fellow, whoever he is," he added. "Some stranger, I suppose?" turning to the girl who was holding his coat, and watching the boat with straining eyes and breathless suspense.

"Yes, yes! some stranger, of course," she assented, without once moving her eyes, still fixed in unflinching steadiness on the boat, which seemed to be straining every nerve to reach the men.

It was getting nearer, nearer, nearer; it was alongside of one, and the fact was notified by a hoarse prolonged cheer from the crowd, who, although by no means inclined for deeds of daring, do themselves appreciate those deeds in others.

"Here they are! they have got the other, and they are coming back," was announced from one to the other.

All along the beach, which was now one seething mass of human beings, were thousand of eyes turned on the sea.

The stranger's friend standing on a bench, his face and features typical of horror and despair, looked more like the traditional hen whose ducklings has taken to the water than a sane British citizen.

And now they are coming in, they have to face the surf once more. A hush of suspense denotes that everyone is aware that this is the critical moment—the moment of life or death!

Which will it be? It will be life.

After various ineffectual struggles—after being on the brink of capsizing more than once—after bringing everyone's heart into their mouths about half-a-dozen times—they grate on the beach, and are landed far up the shingle, on the crest of a monstrous wave.

Everyone breathes freely now, and everyone's tongue is loosed, and everyone is talking at once, the hero of the occasion leaving the sailor to accept the plaudits of the multitude, and having said,—

"Come down to the *Constantia* steam-yacht in harbour, and I'll pay you your fifty pounds."

"Pon my word, sir," said the sailor, "I'll as soon shake hands with you, if I might make so bold."

"All right, you can do that as well," returned the other, with a cheery laugh; but seeing that there was about to be a rush of many, all making the same demand, he hastily walked up to where the girl was standing with his coat, and taking it from her with a word of thanks, hastily put it on, and beckoning his pale, agonised looking friend, thrust him into a fly—which happened to be close by—and drove off, almost before anyone could realise that he was gone!

The crowd were hurt and indignant that their "lion" had gone away from them. They would have liked him to talk to them a little, to roar for them a bit, and to tell them all about himself, but he was already far away down the parade, and almost out of sight, and no one knew anything about him.

He was a stranger—that was all that they could say; a good-looking, broad-shouldered stranger, in a dark blue serge yachting suit.

"Rather took the wind out of these fellows' sails, eh, miss!" said the old salt, with the spy-glass; "showed them a fine example, eh? They look a bit ashamed of themselves, I think, now"—pointing to where a group with very serious faces were listening to the radiant sailor who had done a deed of bravery and earned a fifty-pound note.

"It wasn't so bad as it looked, mayhap?" suggested one of them in a bold, deep voice.

"Oh, wasn't it? Just you go out and try,

that's all! Only that other chap and me was so strong, and made head against the waves by sheer brute force, we'd a been capized or swamped half-a-dozen times over. He's a fine chap; that is what I call a man," looking round contemptuously, forgetting that it had required a bribe of fifty pounds to rouse his manhood. "I'll drink his health to-night, and no mistake," he averred, sauntering slowly up the beach, with hands in pockets, and an unmistakable swagger, followed at a little distance by the now scattering crowd.

"Well, what did you think of that Nellie?" said Molly, coming up to her, and taking her arm, and speaking with breathless eagerness. "Why did you not stay by me?"

"Oh, I was pushed and hustled by the crowd, and I lost my temper when I heard that poor soldier appealing to the wrecks in vain, and made a regular fool of myself, stamping and abusing them, and finishing off by bursting into tears, and that young man heard me calling them names, but I was in such a state of mind I did not care what I said or did. I was just mad with fear and rage, and he heard me, and took off his coat, and went down at once, calling for volunteers. He bribed the man who went with him with fifty pounds. Then, when he came back, he would not listen to a word of thanks, but just hurried on his coat, rushed into a fly and tore off."

"I wonder who he is?" said Molly, eagerly. "I wonder if we could find out in the visitors lists?"

"Whoever he is, he is a hero," said Nellie, with sparkling eyes; "like one reads of in old times, and I would think it an honour to know him, and I only hope we may meet somewhere or other again."

"You are not generally so enthusiastic about the sterner sex," said her friend, with a laugh, as they fought their way home against the wind.

"No, I am not," she answered, quickly; "but this is the exception that proves the rule."

CHAPTER IX.

THE rescue of the two soldiers, and the thrilling circumstances attending that event were duly chronicled in the *Local Thunderer*, but no clue was afforded that gave any hint of the stranger's name—the stranger who had been the mysterious hero.

Some people said he was an officer, staying with another officer in barracks; some said he was a foreign count—some said he belonged to a yacht which had steamed away the next morning; but no one was really one bit wiser than their neighbours.

Molly and her friend often talked about him, wondered who he was, where he came from, and would they ever see him again?

Their wish was gratified in a very unpleasant manner before long, and in the following manner.

Mrs. Hill had a pretty pony-carriage, and a pretty pony; and was very fond of taking long country drives, accompanied by Molly, and a tiny groom.

The pretty pony had gone permanently lame, and was lately replaced by another—a colt of fourteen hands—black brown, the fashionable colour; extremely fast, showy, and handsome; price, one hundred and twenty guineas.

He had been purchased more for looks and style than character; and his new mistress soon discovered that he was a handful to drive.

His mouth was like iron; he was always looking out for something to shy at, and more than once had bolted for a short distance in a very alarming manner.

Good-bye to the nice, quiet, peaceful country drives, among lanes where the young ladies could descend and gather wild flowers at their ease; could pick them from the carriage, could pass train, jingling country waggon, and traction engine in safety.

The new pony changed all that. There never was a drive now without some "scene." Mrs. For-

tescue had no idea that her animal was not as quiet as a sheep.

No one knew his "goings on" except Mary, Nellie, and the groom; and the mistress was ashamed to tell him, lest she should be thought a coward, and afraid of him—which she was in her heart.

So it happened that on a certain fine August afternoon the young ladies set out to pay a country visit at some distance—Nellie, in a new white dress of most *recherche* description, a sapphire-blue velvet toque, a white lace parasol, and long tan gloves; Mary, in pale pink, with a large white hat, half-smothered in long ostrich feathers, and a parasol, own sister to Nellie's.

They thought themselves looking very smart, indeed, and so they were.

Two prettier girls could not have been found in Seabeach.

It happened to be Monday, and the pony was fresh—very exceedingly fresh—snorting, and whisking his tail, and making sudden dashes, and rushes, and jerks.

Nellie, with her mouth very firmly set, her hands fully occupied, her eyes on the pony's ears, had no time for conversation, and was driving very well.

Passing from the town to the suburbs—from the suburbs to the country, and once out in the lanes—she felt more at ease, and turned to say something to Mary; when, at that instant, a child, or rather a good-sized boy, suddenly jumped from a bank right into the middle of the road; the pony gave a shy—a frightful shy to one side, then a plunge forward, dragging Nellie almost over the splashboard.

The fragile light little carriage rocked once, and recovered its balance—another lurch, and over it went, actually upside down—wheels uppermost!

The groom and the young ladies were shot out in three different directions, and away tore the pony, full gallop, down the road, with the remains of the trap at his heels.

Finally kicking himself quite clear of everything, he made off for long afternoon's enjoyment in the free open country, and was only caught at nine o'clock that night.

Meantime, his victims in the road remained immovable for several minutes.

The first person on the ground was the hero of the bathing accident, who had been walking on the down above, and seen the whole catastrophe.

He came down at express speed—sprang into the road, and picked up the lady nearest to him, Miss Fortescue.

"Oh, I'm so bad!" she gasped, feeling helplessly for her hat, which had been flattened into a pancake—her veil split up the middle—her dress in rags—her very gloves in ribbons.

"But do look at Nellie, never mind me," hurrying over to where her friend lay in a heap beneath a bank. "She's very much hurt. I'm afraid!" she said, in a terrified voice. "You hold her, and I'll run to the farmhouse for help; and oh! look at Thomas!" in a tone of horror.

Thomas had had his head cut open, and now approached them, bleeding terribly.

"I always knew he would do it, sooner or later," he said, breathlessly; "but Mrs. Hill would not be said or led. She's badly hurt, miss, I'm afraid, miss."

"No; I'm not!" said a faint voice, as she struggled to sit up. "Oh! Mary, I hope I have not killed you and Thomas. You seem to have hurt your head, Thomas! This is too much," staggering to her feet, "to turn us out in the road, kick the carriage to pieces, and go off with himself! Look at my arms and hands!" displaying a mass of broken skin and bruises. "And oh!" suddenly catching a glimpse of the stranger who had been staying behind her all the time, and had assisted her to rise, though she never noticed him. "It's you again—you seem to come in for these kind of things!" mockingly.

"I'm sorry to say I do," he answered, gravely. "I'm afraid you are badly hurt."

"No, not very badly. Thomas looks much worse. Here, Mary, if you could get at my handkerchief, he might tie it round his head. Just

look at our clothes!—we are like millers—ragged millers. Where is my hat?" she asked, looking round. "Thank you, very much"—to the stranger who had picked it up, and began to flatten it into shape. "It is a mercy we are not all killed; and now what are we to do next?" looking helplessly down the road, where part of the carriage and two or three cushions were strewn in the dirt, "and here we are. That is what remains of the trap, but where's the pony?" "Dead I hope," exclaimed Mary, viciously. "Hateful little vicious beast! I knew he was going to do something to-day."

"Why do you not tell me in time, my good girl," said her friend, with a smile, "and we might have got out and walked. We will have plenty of walking as it is—three miles to Seabeach."

"If you will be advised by me," said the young man, who had picked up two parasols, a bracelet, and a card-case, "I would humbly suggest your walking down to that farm-house in the trees, resting, bathing your cuts and bruises, and sending into Seabeach for a fly. I will fetch one for you if you like," politely.

"Thank you very much indeed. We will start off at once. No use standing here like—like Marius among the ruins of Carthage, is there?"—laughing. "And I daresay we shall be able to find some little boy who will run into Seabeach, and I hope they will be able to give us a cup of tea at the farmhouse."

"That is what you ladies always have a craving for. No matter what your affliction, tea—a cup of tea—whether you are crying, or going to be married, or have met with an accident, or come home from a dance."

"Are the ladies of your family very partial to that cup that cheers but does not inebriate?" she asked, with a smile.

"I am not so fortunate as to have any ladies in my family," he said, rather stiffly. "You seem to be very badly hurt," surveying the hand from which she was endeavouring to disengage a tattered glove with great dismay. "Allow me, and I will remove it," and he did quickly, easily, and painlessly, with as apt fingers as if he had been a surgeon; and in taking off the glove he discovered a wedding-ring.

Yes, this pretty enthusiastic girl, whom he had seen down on the beach in a passion of tears, who bore her upset now so courageously, and made no light of many deep scars and cuts and bruises, was actually a married woman! Who would have thought it!

In time they made their way down to the farmhouse and told their pitiful tale, and were received by the bountiful-looking mistress of the house with much sympathy and, so to speak, open arms.

Thomas's head was bandaged, a boy was despatched for a fly, tea was got ready in the abdy, sanded parlour; and Mary and Nellie were taken upstairs to a low room with casement window to have their wounds attended to.

Scrapes and bruises were the worst—no sprains and no bones broken. Nellie's pretty fresh white frock hung from her shoulders in rags.

"It was quite awful," she said, "you could see her bare arms."

And she gladly accepted an old white China silk shawl in which to wrap herself, which white silk shawl was Mrs. Merton's, the farmer's wife's pearl-of-price, and the very head and front of her wardrobe.

After awhile, they having dusted their dresses and smoothed their hair, and repaired themselves generally, came down to tea, to which the strange gentleman, who was lounging outside, was also invited.

Thomas had been in the kitchen, and soon they were seated round the shiny black oak table, partaking of tea and cream, brown bread and fresh butter, as sociably as if they had known each other all their lives, and yet the larger number of the company did not know each others' names.

They were all in capital spirits, and laughed and joked about the dilapidated condition of the carriage, the probable whereabouts of the pony, and so on.

"Bad-tempered, vicious brute," said Lord

Ravenhill—for, of course, you have long ago guessed that it is he. "Not fit for any lady to drive. I wonder"—looking across at Nellie, who, wrapped in the silken shawl, with an unusual colour in her cheek, and pretty little loose locks of her hair protruding over her forehead, was looking particularly well—"I wonder," he said, slowly, "that your husband bought such a brute, or allowed you to drive it."

At this seemingly harmless speech the delicate colour sank from her cheeks, from her lips, and she said in a very cool, frosty sort of tone,—

"My—my husband has nothing to say to it. It is nothing to him."

Lord Ravenhill felt that he was snubbed, that he had been making too free with this dainty, proud young lady with the patrician features and the deep violet eyes.

Something more than her mere words conveyed her annoyance—her eyes, her look, her little chill smile—and he turned for consolation to the other young lady, the dark eyed, piquant-looking companion, and began to talk of something else; and Mrs. Merton, who had been out into the kitchen for a fresh supply of cream, came in and made a grand diversion by asking them if they had seen the great account of the two men who were nearly drowned—the whole thing was in the *Seabeach Express*!

"Yes, we not only saw it in the paper, but we witnessed the thing itself!" said Nellie, who had recovered her good humour: "and this gentleman was the one who went out in the boat and brought them in," nodding her head, and smiling over at her *vis-à-vis*.

"Bless my heart! you don't say so. I'm proud to see you under my roof, sir. It was a wonderful fine thing to do."

"No, nothing, nothing at all," reddening a good deal. "I can't allow you to be letting the cat out of the bag with Mrs.—Mrs.—Mrs.—" looking across at Nellie, interrogatively.

"Hill, my name is Hill," she said, quietly.

"Just the half of mine," he returned, with a smile, and then followed the two girls to the open door, which led into an old fashioned garden, blooming with stocks, and pinks and pansies, and large bushes of fragrant lavender.

"And won't you tell us the whole of it?" said Molly, plucking a spray and putting it in her bosom.

"We always had an idea we should meet you again, at least I had," said Nellie, colouring. "I had a presentiment that I had not seen the last of you."

"And you had not," smiling.

What handsome dark eyes he had!

"No, and I am so glad to have an opportunity of telling you how much I—we—I"—stammering—"thought of what you did the other day. It is a relief to me to tell you," blushing.

"I am afraid you are making a great deal of a very trifling matter," he said, colouring also. "Please do not take the public into your confidence and tell them that it was I. Spare me, I beseech you!"

"How can we do that?" said Mary, with an amused shrug of her shoulders. "You forget that we do not know your name."

"That omission is soon remedied," he said, cheerfully. "My name is Ravenhill—Hugh Ravenhill, I—Look out Miss What's-your-name," he interrupted, guiltily. "Mrs. Hill has fainted! There! Lay her down on the grass and I'll run in for some water."

Coming back in an instant with Mrs. Merton he said,—

"I thought she was a good deal more hurt than she pretended. She has been keeping up too much, and now she has collapsed. You rub her hand—not that one, that is the one that is hurt," he said to Mary, authoritatively.

Mary who was nearly as overwhelmed by the news as her friend, did not seem to know what she was doing, but left all "the fanning and sweet bottle business," as he called it, to Mrs. Merton and himself.

After a while their efforts were crowned with

success, and the patient came round and staggered up and sat down on a bench outside the parlour window, looking as white as a sheet, and very much upset and ill.

"I told you you were more hurt than you pretended," said Lord Ravenhill confidently. "You ought to see a doctor the moment you go home. Such a capsiz as you had is not to be laughed at. Do you think a little brandy would do her good, Mrs. Merton?" turning to that elderly dame with an air of critical inquiry.

"Not for me," said Nellie, suddenly finding her tongue, "not brandy for millions; the very smell of it is enough. Oh! here is the fly at last," she added in a tone of intense relief, and their cavalier hastened to the avenue gates to throw it open and hold parley with the driver; and whilst he was away Mary said in a significant low tone,—

"I suppose we must give him a seat back to town, eh?"

"Yes," assented the other, wearily, "I suppose we must;" and so Lord Ravenhill drove back to Seabeach with his wife and her friend, little knowing who one of his companions was.

He was very kind and attentive to them; made the coachman drive slowly over rough places, handed them out carefully at their own hall door, and declared his intention of calling to inquire the next day; and, having seen them safely, on their own premises he took off his hat and walked away in the direction of the docks.

"Mary," said her friend, when they had told their adventures, and despatched seekers in quest of trap and pony, and reached the retirement of their own room, "did you ever know anything so awful as this?" casting her hat down upon the bed with a gesture of desperation. "It's too extraordinary! Fancy his being my husband!"

"And fancy your husband being so nice!" smiling approvingly.

"What am I to do? He will be coming here; he is Teddy's friend and ours now in a way, and I am sure we shall see a great deal of him. But if he ever has a glimmering of an idea of whom I am, I shall leave you all and run away to America!"

"And if you do, you will be a great goose for your pains! Why should you run away?"

"Because—because—I would—and should."

"Because is no reason," argumentatively.

"Here, Mary!"—suddenly snatching up a prayer-book—"swear to me on this, that you will never, never tell him!"

"No need of swearing," said Mary. "I'll promise, and that will be enough. I've kept your secret pretty well, and I am not going to tell him now, unless you give me leave."

"Then you may be certain of one thing—I'll never do that!"

CHAPTER X.

For two or three days after the accident Mrs. Hill remained in her room, the bruises and abrasions were so painful.

She could not bear the friction of her ordinary dress, and she had been more shaken than any of the party, not only physically, but morally.

Lord Ravenhill, who had discovered an old friend in Captain Fortescue, was now daily in the house, brought home to lunch or dinner by the hospitable young officer; who on his side spent a good deal of his leisure on board his friend's steam-yacht, now in the inner harbour—the admiration of all passers-by—with her roomy decks, large cabins, bright brasses, and smart-looking seamen, with her name, *Constantia*, in golden letters, on the bands of their caps.

The crew were not accustomed to be thus landed for a week at a time in the very height of the yachting season, and wondered and grumbled to themselves, as they played cards on deck, these magnificent August afternoons.

"What on earth the skipper?"—as they could Lord Ravenhill—"called up to now? and what was keeping him in Seabeach?"

If he had been asked the question point

blank he would have not been ready with any reply.

He asked himself over and over again, what he was lying up in harbour for, and was ashamed to tell himself the truth.

He told himself that he wanted to see more of Fortescue—such a rattling good fellow—it was really well worth staying on a week or two, to talk over their shooting experiences and yarns, and fight their victories o'er again.

He certainly did not like to admit to himself that he was anxious to have another interview with Mrs. Hill, the "pretty young widow," as he had made up his mind she must be—having subjected his friend Teddy to a vigorous cross-examination one evening after arrival on board the *Constantia*.

"Look here, Teddy," he said, after the dessert had been placed on the table and servants had withdrawn, "what would you think of getting your mother and sister and Mrs. Hill to come for a cruise with me? We might run down to Lisbon, and if they liked on to Gib. Lovely weather, eh? Lots of room, you see!" pointing to various gilt-panelled cabin doors. "We haven't a bad cook, you know; and I'll get a piano on board, and a lot of books."

"I'm sure they would like it awfully; only we would be such a large party!" returned Teddy, doubtfully.

"Nonsense! the more the merrier! Your sister's intended might come, too! Make things pleasanter for her, eh!" laughing.

"If he could get leave!" dubiously.

"Why not? Of course he can! And perhaps Mrs. Hill's husband would join us, too! By-the-way, who is he, and where is he?" he asked, with well-dissembled nonchalance.

"I should be uncommonly obliged to you if you could tell me," said Teddy, squaring his elbows on the table, and blowing a cloud of smoke into the air, "for it is more than I know myself."

"You don't say so!" said his companion, in amazement. "This is all humbug! You must have some idea."

"Not the smallest, upon my honour, my dear fellow."

"Is she a widow?" inquisitively.

"I cannot tell you that, either."

"But your mother and sister know?" interrogatively.

"Yes, they know right enough, I imagine, and for once a pair of women have been able to keep a secret."

"But why should there be any mystery about it?" demanded the other, angrily. "If the man is dead, he is dead, and there's an end of it. And if he is not, he must be under some cloud and unable to show up, for she is a very pretty girl. It's not likely he deserted her! She can't be more than one-and-twenty."

"Oh, she is more than that," said Teddy, reflectively. "I'll tell you all I know about it. When I came home last time from India I found Mrs. Hill installed as a permanent inmate—a second daughter to my mother, and a sister to Mary, with whom she was at school. I tried to find out who she was, where she came from, and all that sort of thing, but my mother said that her former history was very painful, and she did not wish it to be talked about, nor the husband. At first I came to the conclusion that Mr. Hill was in the land of the living, but now I have quite made up my mind that he is dead and, let us hope, buried."

"Why so?" asked his companion, incredulously.

"Because he is never mentioned. She never gets any letters from him, but not only that, there is a kind of silence about him that I could not exactly explain, that makes me feel pretty sure that he is not in the land of the living. Besides, she was in the deepest mourning when she came to my mother, and she has a handsome jointure."

"And the mourning and the jointure look like a widow, you think?" said Lord Ravenhill lazily.

"What else?"

"What else, indeed! I dare say she married

some scamp in her teens, and he led her a life for a while, and then was obliging enough to make his exit to another world; but somehow she looks far more like an unmarried girl than either wife or widow."

"Nevertheless she is both, safe enough," said Captain Fortescue, decidedly.

"Well, we need not count on Mr. Hill's company," returned his host pushing back his chair and rising. "You must try and get your mother to come on a cruise. I'll take the best care of the family and not bring them to grief; you will talk her round for me. Come along and take a turn on the pier, it's getting rather stuffy below. Have another cigar. There's the box, help yourself!"

The next afternoon Nellie was sufficiently recovered to make her appearance in the drawing-room, looking extremely fresh and young and pretty in a soft white dress, with a silver belt and necklace, and a bunch of carnations at her throat.

Teddy Fortescue, the tea tray, and Lord Ravenhill, entered simultaneously, and were all made equally welcome.

This was the meeting she had been bracing herself up to for the last four days. She wanted to talk to him, as a complete stranger of course, yet knowing all the time he was her cousin and her husband, and then to let him go his own way and allow their lives once more to drift apart.

"I am glad to see you down, Mrs. Hill," he said, taking a low chair close to the tea-table. "I hope you are quite recovered from the effects of your accident."

"Yes, quite, thanks," she answered, without looking at him, and continuing to keep her eyes fastened on a satin sachet that she was embroidering for a bazaar.

"What had happened to her?" he asked himself, irritably. Had he offended her in any way? She was quite different to the girl on the beach and in the farm-house. Cool, self-contained, reserved, and distant!

(To be continued.)

A DELICATE POSITION.

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(Continued from page 57.)

"Is it very serious, Blanche?" he laughed, a trifle uneasily, "I confess you have frightened me; you have all the air of a Grand Inquisitor. But my conscience does not reproach me with any great enormity, so I think I may venture to hear your question."

She did not respond to his playful *bardinage*, but continued with a serious air.

"Carry your mind back to the night of the burglary; do you remember what happened then?"

"I am not likely soon to forget it," he said, with a touch of humour, "I had just returned from Myson's when I heard Miss Forrest scream, and a few seconds later caught sight of two fellows issuing from the little door at the side of the house. One of them was too quick for me, and darted behind the trees, but the other I managed to secure. Naturally he struggled violently, and in the scuffle I heard the report of a pistol, and dropped, the rest you know."

"Yes, but the question is, how much do you know?"

"I!" with an air of surprise, "nothing. I can only guess that some of you discovered me, and took me into the house."

"You will not be astonished when I tell you that it was Miss Forrest, who found you!"

"No!" after a slight hesitation, "perhaps not. She would probably hear my cry, and the sound would direct her. But whether does all this tend, for there must be some meaning hidden in your remarks?"

His uneasiness was perceptibly increasing. What had occurred? Had there been a scene? Had Nellie, in a moment of weakness betrayed their secret?

Blanche's next remark revealed the truth.

"I have spoken of this," she said, calmly, but resolutely, "because it was something which happened then suggested my question. Maurice, how long have you known Nellie Forrest?"

In his astonishment, the invalid almost sprang to his feet.

"Blanche!" he cried, "you are not accusing me of disloyalty to you!"

"I accuse you of nothing," she returned. "I am asking a simple question."

The man lay back and reflected. Clearly it was futile to maintain silence any longer. Evidently the girl knew something, and it was best now for all their sakes that she should learn the whole story. His confession was not such a very dreadful one, he had fallen in love and been rejected; the whole story was summed up in that.

"It is a painful subject, dear," he commenced, "concerning which you wish me to speak, but you have a right to know it. Without entering into details, I can tell you the whole affair in a sentence. Years ago I asked Miss Forrest to be my wife and she refused. Rather humiliating perhaps, but free from complications," and he smiled cheerfully.

"Maurice," exclaimed the girl earnestly, "do not misunderstand what I am about to say; but is this business so simple as it appears on the surface?"

"I do not follow you," he said, impatiently, "the facts are clear enough. Years ago I asked a girl to be my wife, and she refused; what more need be said? Why discuss the matter now?"

"Better now, than that it should haunt us all our lives. Let us look it fairly in the face. You loved Nellie once; suppose she loved you! Suppose her love is so great at this very time, that it is slowly killing her!"

She kept her gaze fixed steadily upon him and the expression of his face told her what she wished to ascertain. Strive as he might he could not banish the lovelight from his eyes until Blanche had read his secret.

She crossed the room and stood before him.

"Maurice," she said, gently, "do you not recognise the truth? I do not blame you; always remember that, but we have made a mistake, you and I, let us be thankful we have discovered it in time. Do not reproach yourself dear; even now I could trust you with my life's happiness, and you would not fail me, but you cannot give me your heart's love, for it is Nellie's. Maurice, dear, I give you back your troth; believe me it is better so, however painful, it may appear at first. In the years to come you will look back upon this day, and bless my action. One thing more, dear, let me say, for I do not wish you to over-estimate my sacrifice. This is exceedingly painful to me, and I will not disguise that there are many weary days in store for me, but at the same time I shall not suffer as Nellie would. Hush! I do not speak, there is my aunt, I will go to meet her."

Half-an-hour later when Mrs. Seymour entered the room it was evident that Blanche had told her everything.

"My dear Maurice!" she exclaimed, "I scarcely know whether to offer you my sympathy or congratulations; but, as far as I can understand, Blanche has acted rightly. At all events there is one person who will be very pleased. Ah, I see you look puzzled! Have you forgotten Mr. Ferris and his dying uncle, whom he is nursing? If the information of Blanche's freedom does not cut short the necessity for his attendance on that interesting invalid, I shall be much mistaken."

"Do you really mean?"

The lady laughed.

"Why, it was patent to anyone with eyes; he lost his heart to her the first day he came, and although she does not know it, she is half in love with him already."

"If I only thought so," he exclaimed, with sudden energy, "it would remove the chief source of my distress."

"I am rarely deceived in these matters, Maurice; I saw it long since."

That night, after retiring to his room, Maurice had plenty of food for thought, and he lay for

hours pondering over this strange turn of events. One thing was abundantly clear—Nellie still loved him. How Blanche had gained her knowledge he had not asked; but she would not have spoken so decisively, had not her authority been beyond question.

Maurice desired to act with all fairness and honesty; but it appeared to him that the matter had been taken out of his hands. Blanche had set him free from his promise, and certainly he could not compel her to marry him. And unless he chose deliberately to deaden his feelings, he could not but admit that her action was the salvation of at least two out of the three people involved in this wretched tangle.

It was idle to make pretence any longer. Had this *contretemps* not occurred, he would have married Blanche and devoted himself to her; but his love for her was not the passion which consumed his veins when he thought of Nellie, and he knew it. He remembered Mrs. Seymour's remark, too, and derived some amount of comfort from it. If that lady had accurately divined the reason of his friend's flight, then, after all, some good might come from the wretched business. Ferris was young, wealthy, handsome, talented, and in every respect suited to Blanche. He did not believe that as yet the latter had given his friend a single thought; still, it was far from improbable that in the course of time she might learn to care for him.

One thing he resolved upon, as he finished this troublesome introspection, he would write to his friend as soon as possible, and inform him that he himself was no longer engaged to Blanche.

Meanwhile Nellie, unconscious of the interview between Blanche and Maurice—for she had remained alone in her room all the evening—was endeavouring to find some mode of escape from her miserable position. She could not leave Seymour Hall, for she had absolutely nowhere to go, yet if she remained it would be impossible to avoid meeting him, which she dreaded.

What had Blanche told him? she wondered. What would he do? Would he despise her openly, or treat her, as she richly deserved, with contempt?

She forced herself to appear at breakfast the next morning, and heard, with a sense of mingled relief and surprise, that Blanche was going on a visit to Lady Myson's, and would probably be absent for a week.

Both the ladies greeted Nellie with their usual kindness, though she thought Mrs. Seymour regarded her with a curious expression; but the meal passed without any allusion to Maurice, and, escaping as soon as practicable, she took Alice, and wandered away into the park.

For two or three days she managed cleverly to avoid Maurice, for, although totally unaware of Blanche's generous self-sacrifice, she felt an instinctive repugnance to meet him. Still, this state of things could not continue for ever; the invalid was rapidly recovering strength, and, on the third morning succeeding Blanche's departure, he took his seat at the breakfast-table.

They were very quiet, leaving Mrs. Seymour to do most of the talking; but from time to time Maurice stole a cautious glance at the girl's face, striving to discover there some confirmation of Blanche's story.

Presently Mrs. Seymour, judging that Maurice would be glad to be left alone with the girl, took an opportunity to leave the room, on the plea of visiting the nursery; and before Nellie could follow her example the young man said, "Miss Forrest, can you spare me a few minutes? I have something to say to you. I have had a letter from your publisher," he added, hastily, noticing the expression of alarm on her face.

"It is very kind of you to take such trouble," she said; "but I think I would let that rest until you are stronger; you have not sufficiently recovered to go into business matters yet."

Maurice blushed slightly; he certainly had received a note concerning Nellie's novel, though it was not of great importance, but it would serve as an excuse for an interview.

"It is a nice morning," he replied; "and if you do not object, I think a little turn in the grounds would do me good. At the same time, I can tell

you how your business is progressing. Will you come with me?"

"If you think it will not over-fatigue you," she answered. "I will fetch my hat, and be with you, in a few minutes."

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. SEYMOUR smiled to herself when Nellie looked into the nursery to inform her that Mr. Stanhope wished to consult her respecting her book.

"Very good child," she said, "run away. Perhaps the fresh air will put a little colour in your cheeks; you are looking pale; I must not let you work so hard. Alec, dear, have you not a kiss for Miss Forrest this morning?"

Nellie raised the boy in her arms and kissed him; then turned and went down to where Maurice was awaiting her.

Though still suffering slightly from the pain of his wound, the latter looked little the worse for his recent adventure.

He raised his hat as the girl approached, and they walked slowly away from the front of the house.

Fearful lest he should overtake his strength, Nellie suggested that they should direct their steps to the summer-house, and he willingly acquiesced in the proposal.

"By the way," she said timidly, "I have never yet expressed my sorrow at your accident. I need scarcely say how grieved I was, especially since had it not been for my stupidity, it would in all probability not have happened."

He looked at her with a tender smile.

"In what varied lights different people regard the same thing," he remarked, "you express regret at what I shall always consider the luckiest event of my life. It does not appear that the police will ever catch those gentlemen, and upon my word I shall be extremely sorry if they do, for I owe them a heavy debt of gratitude."

The speech puzzled her.

"I certainly fail to perceive why you should be so excessively grateful," she exclaimed.

"And yet they did me a most friendly service."

The statement appeared so ludicrous that she laughed heartily.

"I must confess you seem to me to have a queer idea of friendship; now for my part I should not care for such a novel mark of esteem as a leaden bullet."

They had reached the summer-house by this time, and before replying he waited until she was comfortably seated.

"Do you not know," he asked, "that what happened on that night prevented me from making a great—nay, an irreparable mistake?"

She looked at him with an air of the most profound astonishment; it was clear that as yet she had not caught the drift of his meaning.

He knew that he ought to proceed cautiously, but he was becoming restless and impatient.

"Have you not heard," he continued, "of the changed relationship in which Miss Medway and myself stand towards each other?"

Perhaps it was owing to the action of the fresh air, about which Mrs. Seymour had spoken, but whatever the cause, the girl's cheeks dyed with a crimson flush, and the foolish little heart fluttered violently.

"I do not know to what you refer," she murmured, "but—but don't you think we are neglecting the publisher's letter?"

Maurice laughed.

"It was very remiss of me to forget that, but we will waive it for the moment; at present I wish you to understand that I am no longer engaged to marry Miss Medway."

A cold chill swept over the girl and she averted her head so that he should not see her face. What did it mean?

Had he and Blanche quarrelled—and about her?

That seemed the only solution of the mystery. Blanche had seen him and revealed the secret she had discovered; had even perhaps taxed him

with faithlessness and treachery and they had separated in anger.

She bit her lips to repress all sign of the agony which was wringing her heart.

Once before she had wrecked this man's life, and now through her wretched folly his happiness was sacrificed for the second time.

The bitter mockery it overwhelmed her; for she loved him so dearly, and her love brought him nothing but evil.

To have ensured his happiness she would have given her life, and yet she seemed fated to involve him in misfortune and misery.

Presently she raised her face, such a pitiful, tear-stained face, that he longed to clasp her in his arms, and said, brokenly,—

"I will go to Blanche and tell her the truth. She will listen to me; she must. I will show her you are not in fault, that it is all a mistake, and I alone am to blame. Then she will come back, and you will be happy with her again."

"You do not understand," he said slowly, "we have not quarrelled, we are the best of friends, but we have discovered in time that we were about to commit a great error—that is all."

The girl gazed at him with a strange yearning look in her sad eyes, and he continued, gently,—

"Blanche knows the truth; she is aware that even if I married her she would never possess my heart, and so we have agreed to part. Nellie, my darling, do you not see how it is? I cannot marry Blanche for I love you with all the strength of my nature. I fancied once my love was dead, but I know better now, I know that it will never die, that it cannot, even if you send me from you again. But you will not, my beloved, you cannot for you love me, and I will not give you up. I will be firm; no false pride, no unreal shame shall ever part us, for I cannot live without you, my darling."

"And what of Blanche?"

"Blanche knows and approves of my design. Do not torture me unnecessarily; if you refuse me now, I shall never marry, for I love only you; do not drive me to despair."

The girl placed her hand in his and turned to him.

"Maurice," she said softly, "there is no need for reserve between us two, and I am willing to own frankly that I love you; that I have loved you always. I refused you once, and I have given you my reason, a poor one, doubtless, as I see now, but at that time I was an inexperienced girl and acted according to my light. As my love was then, so it is now, and if you think I can honourably become your wife after all that has passed, then I am willing to marry you."

He took her in his arms and rained passionate kisses upon her lips.

"My darling," he cried, "mine to love and cherish as long as life lasts, may I prove worthy of the precious charge entrusted to me."

He drew her head down on his shoulder, and for a long time they sat in silence too happy for speech.

Mrs. Seymour was sitting in the drawing-room when they returned, and Nellie would fain have slipped by to her own room, but the elder lady called her back.

"Well, child," she said gaily, and with a merry twinkle in her eyes, "what is the publisher's wonderful news? It has taken a considerable time to discuss."

The girl's eyes drooped and with a pretty blush she hid her face on the gentle lady's shoulder.

"Oh, Mrs. Seymour," she murmured, "I do not know what you will say, but I am so happy; if it were not for thinking of Blanche, I believe there would not be a happier girl in the world," and, probably by way of proving her statement, she burst into a flood of tears.

Mrs. Seymour kissed her gently.

"Do not fear for Blanche," she whispered, "I have no uneasiness; the pain will naturally be sharp for a space, but it will not break her heart. Now run away and lie down, I am very glad for your sake, my child," and she gave her another loving embrace.

Blanche did not return to Seymour Hall until after Maurice had departed, but one morning

Nellie received a letter from her which comforted her greatly.

"MY DEAR NELLIE," the note ran, "of course I have heard all the news from Aunt Alicia, and I tender you my hearty and sincere congratulations. I am able to do this without reserve, for every day makes it plainer to me that my own love for Maurice was not nearly so deep and true as yours. In fact I am almost ashamed of myself when I think how little the change has affected me.

"The Myrons are extremely kind, and I am enjoying my visit immensely. By the way, do you remember Maurice's friend, Mr. Ferris? It appears he is an old acquaintance of the family, and came here quite unexpectedly shortly after the commencement of my visit. His previous visit to Seymour Hall naturally established a sort of bond between us. He is a general favourite here and certainly makes himself most agreeable. Remember me kindly to Maurice when you write to him.

"Ever your sincere friend,
"BLANCHE."

Nellie showed the letter to Mrs. Seymour, who laughed and said,—

"My dear, I fancy Maurice was right when he called those men his friends, and I am quite sure at least that Mr. Ferris would agree with him."

Now that everything was settled, Maurice pleaded eagerly that the wedding should be fixed for an early date, and Mrs. Seymour added her influence to his. There was no reason for delay she urged; she would charge herself with Nellie's trousseau, and she insisted that the ceremony should take place from her house.

Finally, a date was agreed upon, for the first week in the new year, and the Hall being forthwith given over to an army of dressmakers, Maurice reluctantly tore himself away to see his father, and make the necessary arrangements.

The morning of the day dawned bright and clear, and the quaint, old-fashioned church was filled with spectators, as the wedding party entered.

Very beautiful and happy did Nellie look as she stood by the altar repeating the vows which bound her to the proud, handsome man at her side, and when, later on, they left the Hall for the South of France, where it was intended to pass the honeymoon, there were not a few of Mrs. Seymour's guests who envied Maurice his bride.

One morning, about two months later, Maurice and his wife were seated at breakfast in a comfortable room at Menton when the mail arrived. From a bundle of letters he drew one addressed in a lady's handwriting.

"From Mrs. Seymour," he said, "shall I read it?"

Nellie gave a bright smile of assent, and breaking the seal, he read,—

"Seymour Hall.

"MY DEAR MAURICE,—

"We were exceedingly pleased to receive Nellie's letter, and to hear that you were enjoying yourselves so famously. As you intend returning so shortly, I should not have written now, only I have a piece of news which I know will interest you both. Perhaps the fact that the information enhances my reputation as a prophet makes me the more eager to impart it, for that which I foretold has come to pass. Mr. Ferris has made good use of his opportunity, and yesterday Blanche, who is still staying with me, announced that she has consented to become his wife. So you see, my dear Maurice, here is another illustration of the old proverb 'All's well that ends well.' Nellie, I know, will be delighted, for now her mind will be at rest.

"Your sincere friend,
"ALICIA SEYMOUR."

Nellie turned to her husband, a rich smile illuminating her face.

"I am so glad dear," she said simply, "Mrs. Seymour is right, now I can be perfectly happy."

[THE END.]

FACETIES.

LAWYER: "Are you a single man?" Witness: "No, sir; I'm a twin."

HUSBAND: "Does that new novel turn out happily?" Wife: "It doesn't say. It only says they were married."

"This," said the tired man as he started slowly up the last flight of stairs, "is another storey."

"APPEARANCES are very deceptive," remarked the tenor. "Yes," replied the prima donna; "especially farewell appearances."

THE REASON WHY.—He: "I spoke to him in French, but he didn't understand me." She: "I don't wonder; he's Frenchman."

"ARE you fond of dogs, Miss Van Arndt?" "Very. How did you know?" "Oh, I notice there's always some young puppy following you."

LITTLE DOT: "What kind of a kiss is a stage kiss?" Little Dick (a close observer): "It's a kiss that doesn't rub the powder off."

BILDAH: "Did the editor send that joke back to you?" Shuhite: "Yes." Bildad: "That's funny." Shuhite: "The editor said it wasn't."

LANDLADY: "You haven't touched your coffee, Mr. Jones. Anything unusual the matter with it?" Mr. Jones: "Well, yes, it's hot."

MISTRESS: "What would you do, Bridget, if you could play the piano as well as I can?" Bridget: "Sure I'd go on learning until I could play it decently."

VISITOR (in the asylum): "Who is that wild-looking man in the dangerous ward?" Attendant: "Poet. He tried to write a poem with a rhyme for 'chrysanthemum'."

CROLLY SAFFY: "I think there's something wrong with my bawm, Miss Kostick; who would you see about it?" Miss Kostick: "I would suggest a microscopist."

"HAS your daughter stopped her music lessons?" "Yes, on account of sickness." "When will she be able to go on?" "As soon as the neighbours are well enough to endure it."

DOUBLEDAY: "Miss Twilling rejected me the other night, but she let me kiss her before we parted." Podmore (reflecting): "Did she? I'll go round to-night and propose myself."

FIRST NEIGHBOUR (angrily): "Your boy has been throwing stones at my cat, and I hope you will give him what he deserves." Second ditto: "I will. I'll give him sixpence!"

He (who prides himself on his bluntness): "I say, Miss Newton, let's get married." Miss Newton: "Oh, all right, I'm engaged to Mr. Goodwin. Who'll you marry?"

"THERE you don't hate me, Laura, dear?" "No, George, I like you well enough, but it would be ridiculous for me, to marry you. You are the first man that has proposed to me!"

FRANK: "Wish me luck! I am going into the conservatory to propose to Miss Darlington." Harry: "Well, brace up, old man. You look frightfully depressed." Frank: "Ah, yes! I fear I am going into a decline."

"Do you think you love me, Dennis?" asked Judy. "Go 'way, darlin'; av course I do." "How do you know it, Dennis?" "Be the way I appreciate your presence when I'm away from ye."

GOVERNESS: "You see, my dear, the Antipodeans live on the other side of the earth, and they only go to bed when we are getting up." Daley: "Then I suppose brother Jack is an Antipodean, isn't he?"

"I FIND my lessons in bread-making have saved us many dollars." "But I thought you couldn't eat it, you said?" "We don't, but I make playthings for the baby out of it, and they never break or wear out."

AT THE CONCERT.—Mrs. Malapropos: "Who is the author of this symphony?" Mrs. Newrich (consulting programme): "I've forgotten. Oh, here it is—Allegro Moderato, an Italian, I suppose. What a lot of things he seems to write."

SHE WANTED THE BARGAIN.—Through an error of the clerk the sign read thus—"A great bargain! Last one left! Formerly five dollars. Now offered for eight." And Mrs. Bargain-byer paid eight dollars for it, and went home happy.

"DIDN'T Swiveller fail in business?" "Five times." "Ain't worth a penny!" "Not one." "What's he doing for a living?" "Writing articles on 'Commercial Success, and How it is Achieved.'"

"So he was killed in getting out of the train?" "Yes." "And a total stranger?" "Yes." "Then how do you know that he leaves a wife?" "Easily; he had five unposted letters in his pocket."

"EH, my dearie, but that's a tender little song you've sung to me. It took me back to the days when I was a happy child, working on my father's farm; and while I listened to your voice, dear, I seemed to hear the old fold-gate creaking as it swung."

TEACHER: "Now, do you see the difference between animal instinct and human reason?" Bright Boy: "Yes'm. If we had instinct, we'd know everything we needed to without learning it; but we've got reason, and have to study ourselves mose' blind or be a fool."

DONALD (after the ball): "May I call on you occasionally, Miss Lester?" We seem as old friends. Have I not seen you somewhere before?" Miss Lester (cuttingly): "Yes; you saw me hanging on to the strap in the car one day last week, while you were sitting down."

"WHAT'S John doing now?" "Oh, he's at College." "And William?" "A barrister." "And Dick?" "A doctor." "And the old man?" "Well, he isn't doing anything in particular, except supporting John, and William, and Dick."

The girls were admiring a statuette of Andromeda, which was labelled "Executed in Terra Cotta." "Where is Terra Cotta?" asked one of them, with probably some vague idea of Terra del Pugno. "I am sure I do not know," was the reply, "but I pity the poor girl, wherever it is."

HOUSEKEEPER: "Those eggs you sold me were stale, and I asked you for fresh-laid eggs." Dealer (patronizingly): "Those eggs are fresh, madame, not salted, and they are laid eggs, madame, not manufactured. Had you desired eggs recently taken from the nest, you should have asked for freshly laid eggs."

The guest was not at all satisfied with his dinner, and when the waiter asked him what he would have for dessert he became sarcastic. "I want nothing," he snapped, "and want it quick." The waiter looked over the menu imperturbably. "All right, boss," he responded politely, "but it'll cost you extra; 'taint on the bill."

DID you find out what that woman was hollerin' about?" said Farmer Neakes' wife, when that old gentleman returned to their room in the hotel. "I asked the boy with the programmes," he replied. "What did he say?" "He said it was 'Il Trovatore.' I didn't like to show my ignorance by askin' more questions. But I s'pose it's the fashionable name for toothache."

WHILST strolling down a country lane one day, a farmer met a small boy puffing vigorously at a clay pipe. "My lad," said he, "you ought not to smoke yet; what is your age?" "Ten, zur," was the reply. "Ten," exclaimed the farmer in astonishment, "if you start smoking when you are twenty it will be quite soon enough." "Well, zur," he replied, "I ha' smoked ever since I were a little 'un, and I think I shall stick to it now."

IT was at the breakfast-table, and the young woman's appetite was rather delicate. "No, thank you," she said as her father offered her some wheat cakes. "I quite agree with Herbert. He says he can't stand wheat cakes." "Is Herbert the young man who was here last night?" asked her father, laying his knife and fork down. "Yes." "And who met the milkman when he started home?" "Yes," "Humph," and he resumed operations with the knife and fork; "I suppose he'd have been here yet if he had happened to like wheat cakes for breakfast."

MINISTER (to Rory): "Why weren't you at the kirk on Sunday?" Rory: "I was at Mr. Dunlop's kirk." "I don't like your running about to strange kirks in that way. Not that I object to your hearing Mr. Dunlop, but I'm sure ye widna like yer ain sheep straying away into strange pastures." "I widna care a grain, sir, if it was better grass."

A WAGGISH Cambridge proctor once received a visit from a Mr. Pilgrim, an undergraduate of St. Peter's College, to pay a fine inflicted on him for parading the streets at night without cap and gown. The don, whose Christian name was Paul, said with a bland smile, "Ah, most apposite; a pilgrim goes out to roam improperly attired, and his University gets redress in the form of Peter's pence." "No, sir," growled the student; "she robs Peter to pay Paul."

"SILAS," said Mrs. Comfort, as she looked up from her reading, "is it an awful thing for one man to call another a liar?" "Not from my standpoint." "But here is a case where a man was killed for it." "Then the killer will be hanged, as he deserves to be." "Were you ever called a liar?" "Lots of times." "And what did you do?" "Took time to think it over. If I had lied, then being called a liar was no more than I could expect. If I didn't lie, the man who called me a liar thought I did, and should be argued and reasoned with and made to apologize. While I was taking time to think it over the man generally left, and so there was no occasion to pursue the subject any farther."

AN old physician, who numbered amongst his patrons a very wealthy titled family, was recently called in to prescribe for a slight ailment of the eldest son, a young gentleman of about twenty-three years of age. "A slight cold!" said the doctor, "due, I should say, to exposure!" adding, "Courting some young lady, I suppose, eh?" "Well, yes, doctor!" replied the young fellow, who as well as the rest of the family was accustomed to the eccentric ways of the old man; "you are quite right for once!" "Ah, I thought so!" snappishly retorted the doctor, really angry at being kept in ignorance; "some fortune hunting miss, I suppose. Who is the hussey?" "Your daughter, sir!" replied the young nobleman.

She was waiting for him,—

"Gathering her brows like gathering storms,
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm."

And when he entered the room she began: "This is a nice time of night to—" "I—er—hic—know I'm late," he hastily interrupted, "but I couldn't help it, my dear. Club had—er—big discussion on female beauty." "And what had you to do with that?" demanded the irate wife. "More'n any one there. I was the one—er—who had the most beautiful wife an'er—course the best authority on female beauty, an—" "Why don't you take off your overcoat, Henry? Let me get your slippers for you. It's awful cold outside; I think you must be half frost." Half a minute later Henry was snugly ensconced in his easy-chair with his wife at his feet putting on his slippers.

IN one of the Midland counties there is a religious house belonging to the Institute of Charity. The religious folk continue the good works of the medieval monasteries in dispensing food and clothing to all poor applicants. Some time ago a man presented himself at the door minus boots, and begged for an old pair. Now, it happened that a brother had seen him, before approaching the monastery, remove and hide in the grounds his own boots. So the applicant for bounty was asked to wait while a pair was found for him. The brother aforesaid went to the shrubbery, and entering by another door, brought the man his own boots, saying, "I hope that these may fit you!" The man's face was a picture, but he had no alternative but to accept his own again as though he had never seen them before. The artful dodger recognised the fact that if the brethren were as gentle as doves they were also considerably wiser than the serpent, and made off as quickly as possible.

SOCIETY.

PASSEMENTERIE and fur are mixed in the trimmings on a lately imported cloth dress.

The Queen, it is expected, will not go from Windsor Castle to Balmoral until early in the first week in June.

WHITE dotted muslin is to be one of the popular materials for this summer. The making and trimming are modified to suit the style of the wearer.

THE Emperor of Germany hopes to be able to arrive in the Solent on the morning of August 2nd, which would permit him to visit Goodwood races on the Cup day.

THE visitors of interest this season will be Prince Henry of Prussia, the sailor brother of the German Emperor, and his wife, and of course the Emperor himself, who will visit the Queen at Osborne.

THE Duke of York has been invited to visit Grimsby in July for the purpose of opening the new graving dock for fishing-vessels which has just been constructed there by the Manchester, Sheffield, and Lincolnshire Railway. The Duke will stay at Brocklesby Park, with Lord and Lady Yarborough, if he accepts this invitation.

THE Queen's consent, "as a matter of courtesy," had to be asked for the betrothal of Prince Alfred of Coburg, Hereditary Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, and his cousin—the eighteen-year-old Duchess Elsa of Wurtemburg—but the German Emperor's consent had to be obtained in a very official way.

THE final function of importance this season will be the garden party given by the Prince and Princess of Wales at Marlborough House on July 7th, at which the Queen has promised to be present, and at which also the new Royal bride and bridegroom, the Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Hesse, will also probably be seen.

THE Czar was greatly irritated on learning recently that gambling on a large scale was carried on at the St. Petersburg Yacht Club, and that enormous sums of money had been lost there. His Majesty has intimated his intention of ordering a modification of the club rules by which a certain limitation would be placed on the amounts to be staked by players.

THE Princess of Wales, who is a great lover of animals, has recently written to Sir George Meeson, chairman of the committee of the Home for Lost and Starving Dogs, saying that she is willing to become a patron and a subscriber to the Institution. Receipts have fallen off of late, though the number of animals brought to the institution is ever on the increase. The Princess, who is very tender-hearted over the sufferings of dumb creatures, is taking great interest in the home.

THE Queen has inspected a number of villas in the neighbourhood of Florence with a view to purchasing one, which her Majesty intends to present to Princess Beatrice. The Queen would like to buy, or to take, a long lease of the Villa Petracca, which is a Royal residence, but it has been for many years deserted. This villa is quite a small house, but it has beautiful grounds and occupies a lovely position looking down on the Pistoria-road from a considerable distance.

THE Railway authorities take good care that nothing shall be lacking in the official instructions that may secure perfect safety when the Queen travels. Men are posted at intervals of about half a mile along the whole line, all facing points are plugged over which the train passes, in dull weather a guard travels on a pilot engine a few minutes in advance of the Queen, amply provided with hand and fog signals; the line is kept absolutely clear for fifteen minutes before the passing of the Royal train, superintendents and station-masters have personally to see the train pass, and even the platelayers, gatemen and gängers have special instructions.

STATISTICS.

A BUSHL of sweet potatoes will yield a gallon of alcohol.

ST. PETER'S CHURCH, in Rome, will contain fifty-four thousand persons.

THE falls of Niagara are travelling backward at the average rate of nine feet a year.

THE total length of the Manchester Ship Canal is 35½ miles. The average width at water level is 172 feet, and the minimum depth 26 feet.

THE great spread of instruction in the English language in Japan, has naturally led to a growing demand for English books. Over £5,000 English books of all classes were imported last year, as against 40,000 in 1885.

GEMS.

FAITH is the greatest builder, and envy the greatest destroyer.

SOCIETY is built upon trust, and trust upon confidence in one another's integrity.

GOOD will, like a good name, is got by many good actions, and lost by one.

THE primal duties shine aloft like stars ; the charities that soothe and heal and bless are scattered at the feet of men like flowers.

COURTESY lives by a multitude of little sacrifices, not by sacrifice of sufficient importance to impose any burdensome sense of obligation.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

VEGETABLE HASH.—Chop—not very fine—the vegetables left from a boiled dinner and season with salt and pepper. To each quart of the chopped vegetables add half a cupful of stock and one tablespoonful of butter. Heat slowly in the frying-pan. Turn into a hot dish when done and serve immediately. If vinegar is liked, two or more tablespoonfuls of it can be stirred into the hash while it is heating.

CHOCOLATE ICING.—Quarter of a pound of icing sugar, two ounces of chocolate, a few drops of essence of vanilla. Have the chocolate grated and put it in a small pan with one tablespoonful of water. Stir over the fire till the chocolate is quite melted, then stir in the sugar (it should be sifted). The icing should now be smooth and of consistency to pour. It may need a very little more water or it may not. It is then poured on the cake and spread. It gets hard in a few minutes. The best cake for it is a plum or sponge cake.

SWISS PUDDING.—One full breakfast cup grated bread, two ounces suet chopped, quarter pound sugar, a little nutmeg, one pound of apples, a little water. Peel and slice the apples, and stew them with one tablespoonful of the sugar and a little water to keep them from burning. Mix in a bowl the bread, suet, nutmeg, and what remains of the sugar. Grease a pie dish, and put in the bottom of it half of the mixture in the bowl, then pour in all the stewed apples. Put on the top all the remainder of the mixture, mix it smooth. Put the pudding in the oven for about half an hour.

POACHED EGGS AND KAIL.—Take two heads of green kail and wash well, put them into plenty of boiling water with a dessertspoonful of salt and a pinch of baking soda. Boil till quite tender. Take out and press all the water out. Take away all the fibres and stringy parts, and chop up very finely or put through a sieve. Put this back into a small saucepan with a teaspoonful of butter, a pinch of sugar, salt, and pepper, and mix thoroughly till quite hot. Put on a dish smoothly and flat. Poach two fresh eggs and put them on the top and serve hot. This is most excellent at this season, and may be eaten with bread or potatoes. Kail is a substitute for spinach.

MISCELLANEOUS.

WHEN the ostrich is to be divested of its plumage a long hood is placed over its head, and it is then confined in a raised enclosure about 3 feet square. The birds rarely show fight.

STURGEON for their size are the weakest of all fish ; they are found in some parts weighing over a ton, but are perfectly helpless when attacked by a swordfish the size of a herring.

HERE are fifteen varieties of the word mother, all bearing a distinct resemblance : Anglo-Saxon, modor ; Persian, madir ; Sanscrit, matr ; Greek, meter ; Italian, madre ; French, mère ; Swedish, moder ; Danish, the same ; Dutch, moeder ; German, mutter ; Russian, matr ; Celtic, mathair ; Hebrew, em ; Arabic, am.

DIET for athletes among the Greeks was a very different thing from that prescribed for those at the present day. The Greek candidate for a prize at the games was put on a diet of new cheese, dry figs, boiled grain, milk and warm water, but allowed no meat whatever, and on this apparently simple diet great efficiency in athletic sports was attained.

In South America there is a small fish that not only attacks its fellows of the sea and river, but is greatly dreaded by the natives, who, during certain seasons, have to ford the streams in which the carbitos is found. Bathers are often attacked by them, the sharp, chisel-shaped teeth taking a bite from the flesh wherever they attack. They are perfect scavengers, eating the animals that float down the river, dead or alive.

Is the very middle of the Atlantic Ocean, at about the place the twenty-fifth meridian from London crosses the equator, it is said there is a spot far beneath the waves which is almost continually agitated by submarine earthquake shocks. These are often of such violence as to hurl great columns of water high in the air, or to make waves that are a standing menace to vessels coming in that vicinity.

In Holland the following poetic names for the months are now in use :—January, Lauromaand, chilly month ; February, Sprokeimaand, vegetation month ; March, Lentzimaand, spring month ; April, Grassemaand, grass month ; May, Blowmaand, flower month ; June, Zumermaand, summer month ; July, Hooymaand, hay month ; August, Oostmaand, harvest month ; September, Herstmaand, autumn month ; October, Wynmaand, wine month ; November, Slegmaand, slaughter month ; December, Winnermaand, winter month.

THE Esquimaux of the Arctic practise an ingenious method of slaughtering wolves, planting a stake in the ice with a blade of flint fastened to the upper end. About the flint blade they wrap a piece of blubber, which freezes hard. Presently along come some wolves and lick at the blubber, until the edges of the flint cut their tongues. Tasting their own blood, they become frantic and attack each other, the fight continuing until the whole pack lies dead. Next day the artful hunter comes along and skins them. That is one reason why wolf-skin rugs are so cheap to-day.

AMONG the many fearful methods once invented to cure lunatics of their madness one of the most curious was the circulating swing, mentioned favourably by physicians of the last century. This horrible swing was a small box fixed upon a pivot, and worked by a windlass. The "inflexible" maniac, or the maniac expecting a paroxysm, was firmly strapped in a sitting or recumbent posture. The box was then whirled round at the average velocity of a hundred revolutions a minute, and its beneficial effect was supposed to be heightened by reversing the motion every six or eight minutes, and by stopping it occasionally with a sudden jerk. The results of this swing (which occasionally brought on concussion of the brain) were profound and protracted sleep, intense perspiration, mental exhaustion, and a not unnatural horror of any recurrence to the same remedy, which left a moral impression that acted as a temporary restraint.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

S. W.—We do not know.

R. G.—Your question is indefinite.

L. F.—The first marriage was legal.

Poor PETE.—You must see a doctor.

C. G.—You cannot recover debts from a minor.

Anxious ONE.—We are unable to enlighten you.

LUNA.—What it is you could ascertain from a dealer.

LEGALITY.—Depends on the exact terms of contract.

An OLD READER.—We do not answer letters privately.

BON.—It would be best to have it properly done at the batters.

ROGER.—Explain your case at the County Court office.

RONALD.—You had better show the agreement to a lawyer.

ARTHUR.—All receipts for £2 or more must have a stamp.

E. M.—No assisted passages at any time to the United States.

A. S.—The churchwardens of a parish are ex-officio overseers.

QUEEN.—Quite legal for the Duchess of Albany to marry again.

O. G. H.—Only a lawyer can tell you after inquiring into the case.

LEILA.—You had better inquire at the theatre; we have no record.

ALEXANDER.—The rate of the annuity varies with each additional year.

PATER.—The boy must be fourteen, or have passed the sixth standard.

B. G.—It is not necessary that you should be present at reading of wills.

ELLEN.—There is a cement specially sold for the purpose of artists' shape.

GERALD.—Sugar is found more or less in nearly all vegetable substances.

An INQUIRING READER.—It takes about ten weeks to build a railway engine.

W. H.—The husband's creditors have no claim on anything belonging to the wife.

ALICE.—A lawyer can charge for all papers he writes, certificates or anything else.

OLD STAUNCHASS.—Glue, melted with acetic acid, is best cement for your purpose.

D. N.—The Married Women's Property Act came into force on the 1st January, 1883.

CLARA.—Nothing has yet been discovered better than a little milk lightly rubbed over.

PUZZLED JOHN.—Dudley Castle is in Staffordshire; Dudley town is in Worcestershire.

A. MINOR.—A father is not responsible for debts contracted by his son without authority.

ADMIRER OF THE "LONDON READER".—Impresario has not been enforced for many years.

LANCASHIRE LASS.—Lancashire is greater than Yorkshire from a commercial point of view.

ANNIE LUCILLE.—A girl can choose her own home when she is sixteen years of age in Scotland.

CONSTANT READER.—All laws are supposed to be interpreted by common sense and reason.

H. O.—In packing bottles or canned fruit for moving, alight a sailor band over the body of them.

JOCKEY.—The information you ask for can only be supplied by a search in the files of the paper.

INONORAMUS.—In case of dispute between parents the father has the legal right of naming children.

ONE IN DISTRESS.—Powdered borax liberally strewn about their haunts, and persevered in for some time.

GORDON B.—It will be impossible to trace the man if all you know is his own name, not his number or ship.

R. M. Y.—Doctors do not usually give detailed accounts; merely "attendance and medicine" so much.

YOUTHFUL MARTYR.—We need not attempt to advise where the skilled physicians of the infirmaries have failed.

LOSTUS C.—Earth has three motions: its own axis, round the sun, and among the stars round invisible centres.

BILLALINE.—The father's consent is necessary to the marriage of a girl under age; the mother's is not enough.

A HOUSEHOLDER.—As Lady Day falls on the Sunday you must give up possession of your house on the Saturday.

ANXIOUS TO KNOW.—A master has no right to stop the wages of an apprentice who is prevented by illness from working.

AFFLICTED ONE.—There is no known way to prevent such a growth, and it is extremely difficult to remove it after it has grown.

ONE IN DOUBT.—Soluble glass is slowly soluble in cold and more readily in hot water, if powdered.

N. A. D.—Ordinary copy of birth certificate got at time of registering costs nothing; one got at a later date costs 3s. id.

NATHANIEL WINKLE.—The earliest recorded instance of swearing on the Bible in judicial proceedings dates as far back as 603.

ROXBURY.—Get out as much of the oil as possible with blotting-paper and hot irons on stain, then wash out dirt with a little oxalic acid.

ONE WHO WOULD LIKE TO KNOW.—Webster's Dictionary gives the pronunciation of legislature as "lej-i-stü'-yür" (the 'a' in the third syllable being long).

FLOASIS.—In all matters of this sort the best way is that which is the most simple and attracts the least attention.

FEDERICK.—Manufacturers of cigarettes have their own peculiar combinations of tobacco, which are kept a secret from all other dealers.

UNHAPPY ONE.—By English law a man or woman separated from the wife or husband may not marry unless there has been a divorce.

SAMUEL.—Your only course is to obtain a berth as ordinary seaman and sail for two years, then go up for examination for second mate's certificate.

L. B.—If you are able you can be required to contribute to the support of your father, providing that he becomes chargeable to the parish.

SWEETHEARTS ALWAYS.

If sweethearts were sweethearts always,

Whether as maid or wife,

No drop would be half as pleasant

In the mingled draught of life.

But the sweetheart has smiles and blushes

When the wife has frowns and sighs;

And the wife's have a wrathful glitter

For the glow of the sweetheart's eyes.

If loves were loves always—

The same to sweetheart and wife—

Who would change, for a future of Eden,

The joys of this checkered life?

But husbands grow grave and silent,

And cars on the anxious brow;

Oit replace the sunshine that perished

With the words of the marriage-vow.

Happy is he whose sweetheart

Is wife and sweetheart still;

Whose voice, as of old, can charm;

Whose kiss, as of old, can thrill;

Who has plucked the rose, to find ever

Its beauty and fragrance increase,

As the flush of passion is mellowed

In love's unmeasured peace;

Who sees in the step a lightness;

Who finds in the form a grace;

Who reads an untaught brightness

In the witchery of the face.

Undimmed and unchanged. Ah, happy

Is he crowned with such life!

Who drinks the wife pledging the sweetheart,

And toasts in the sweetheart the wife!

SUSANNA.—It can be brought although the man remains single, if he fail to fulfil his promise within a reasonable time, after being required to do so.

R. M. S.—The late Emperor of the French was not taken prisoner in the Franco-German War; he voluntarily surrendered after the battle of Sedan.

DARBY.—Names of persons "killed on the railway during the last twenty years" could be obtained only by searching newspaper files, and then not completely.

ALSON T.—We have nothing to suggest but the dangerous use of a knife. Possibly some of the machines sold for peeling apples might suit you.

CURIOS READER.—Business addresses are not given in this column; and, therefore, if we had the information you desire, we could not impart it to you.

A PARLOUR MAID.—Hand the dishes at the left hand of each guest, be careful to observe the wants of the guests, and when the time comes lift away the dishes and cover quietly.

TROUBLED MOTHER.—The illegitimacy of a mother makes no difference to the legitimacy of her children born after marriage, or to their power of inheriting property.

PUZZLED BOY.—The owl's steady stare which is considered indicative of wisdom, is the result of a physiological peculiarity, its eyes being immovably fixed in their sockets.

EDGAR LAURENCE.—To defer anything to the "Greek Kalends" is to defer it indefinitely. There were no Kalends in the Greek months; hence the phrase, as implying "never."

C. R. D.—Foolscap paper is so called because paper of that size was, under the Protectorate of Cromwell, and for some time subsequently, marked with a jester's cap and bells.

PRECIOUS.—The Royal Museum, in Madrid, Spain, is said to contain more wealth in pictures than any other gallery of art in Europe. As a collection of masterpieces it is unrivalled.

A. D. E.—The necessary qualifications for the post are perfect facility in the German language, and to be able to read music at sight. The post is only given to the daughters or granddaughters of peers.

IGNORANT LETTERS.—The apostrophe is used before the 'a' in the singular possessive case, as "the girl's book"; after the 'a' in plural possessive case, when a book belonging to several girls is meant.

W. B. E.—You should apply to the Emigrants' Information Office, Broadway, Westminster, for the latest intelligence as to particular fields of emigration, and the prospects of emigrants.

EDWIN'S SWEETHEART.—A bride after the wedding ceremony may be kissed by all the women in the room; but it is not expected to submit to a salute from any males beyond her own immediate relatives.

JASPER.—If you have been a guest at a friend's house, in a distant locality for even a day, it is your duty on your return home to announce to him your safe arrival, and acknowledge his hospitality.

AN INQUIRER.—An adopted child is a stranger in blood to the family into which it is adopted, and can take no share of the adopting parents' estate at their death, except what may be given to it by a will.

ERRY.—Excellent lemon and orange extracts may be made by paring of the yellow peel as thinly as possible, and letting it stand for twenty-four hours in alcohol. Strain and bottle, corking it tightly.

J. P. S.—The Teutons were a powerful people who are said to have dwelt on the southern shores of the Baltic in the vicinity of the Gimbi, together with whom they invaded the Roman Republic at the close of the second century B.C., when they were destroyed by Marius.

ANGRY ERNEST.—If the box was not properly packed and labelled in such a way as to indicate that the goods were perishable, the railway company are not in law liable in compensation for injury done to it, though they may be sued if it is evident that injury resulted either from gross carelessness or malice.

O. F.—The oyster-catcher gets its name from feeding on oysters and other mollusks. It is remarkable for its bill, which is long, straight, compressed, and wedge-like toward the point, and is made use of for opening the shells which contain its favourite food. It sometimes feeds on small fishes.

YOUNG WINE.—Have a small table suitable for the purpose; set it in a corner or anywhere convenient, have a pretty cloth on it, and set the tray there. Then have either thin bread and butter cut in small quarters, or buttered scones or muffins of some sort cut in small portions, and cake or small cakes, something nice and pretty as well.

THROTTLED MAN.—If the squinting arise from the unequal strength of the eyes, the weaker eye being turned away from objects to avoid the fatigue of exertion, it may be cured, it is said, by covering the stronger eye, and thereby compelling the weaker one to exertion; or by the use of goggles, spectacles, &c., in which all except the centre is opaque.

I. R.—The eggs must be quite fresh, put a layer of salt in a barrel, and stick it full of eggs not touching each other; then throw in salt to fill up and cover them; repeat till the barrel is full; put quite an inch of salt on the top and press it down to exclude all air, cover with tight lid and covering; they should keep six months; the salt does not taint the eggs.

BIRD LOVER.—What is recommended for bronchitis in canaries and ordinary singing birds is a little eyre of scissars, given three or four times daily, in six to eight drop doses; keep the room where the cage is, comfortably warm, and remove bird out of all possible draught; bronchitis is often brought on by keeping the bird hanging high up in a room where gas is burning and the air is "exhausted."

INQUIRATIVE IDA.—It is said that the practice of the wife assuming the husband's name at marriage originated from a Roman custom. Thus Julia and Octavia, married to Pompey and Cicero, were called by the Romans Julia of Pompey and Octavia of Cicero, and in later times married women in most European countries signed their names in the same manner, but omitted the "of."

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